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from Dave Sim at fax no.

to the attention of: Anyone reading
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by escargot mail at Box 1674 Stn. C Kitchener
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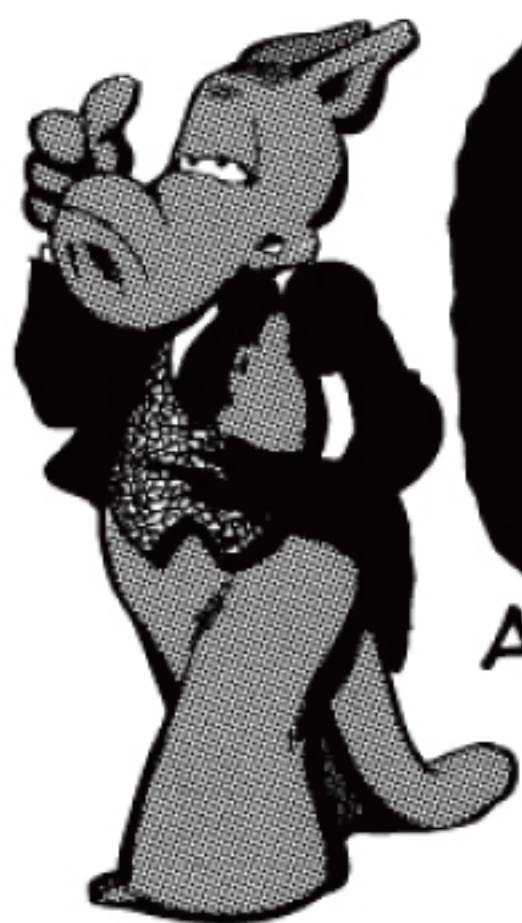
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Sincere thanks to everyone who has devoted that most valuable of human commodities -- their time -- to reading my and Gerhard's work.

Dave Sim, creator, writer, co-artist

Gerhard does prints and commissions and can be contacted at gerhardart.com

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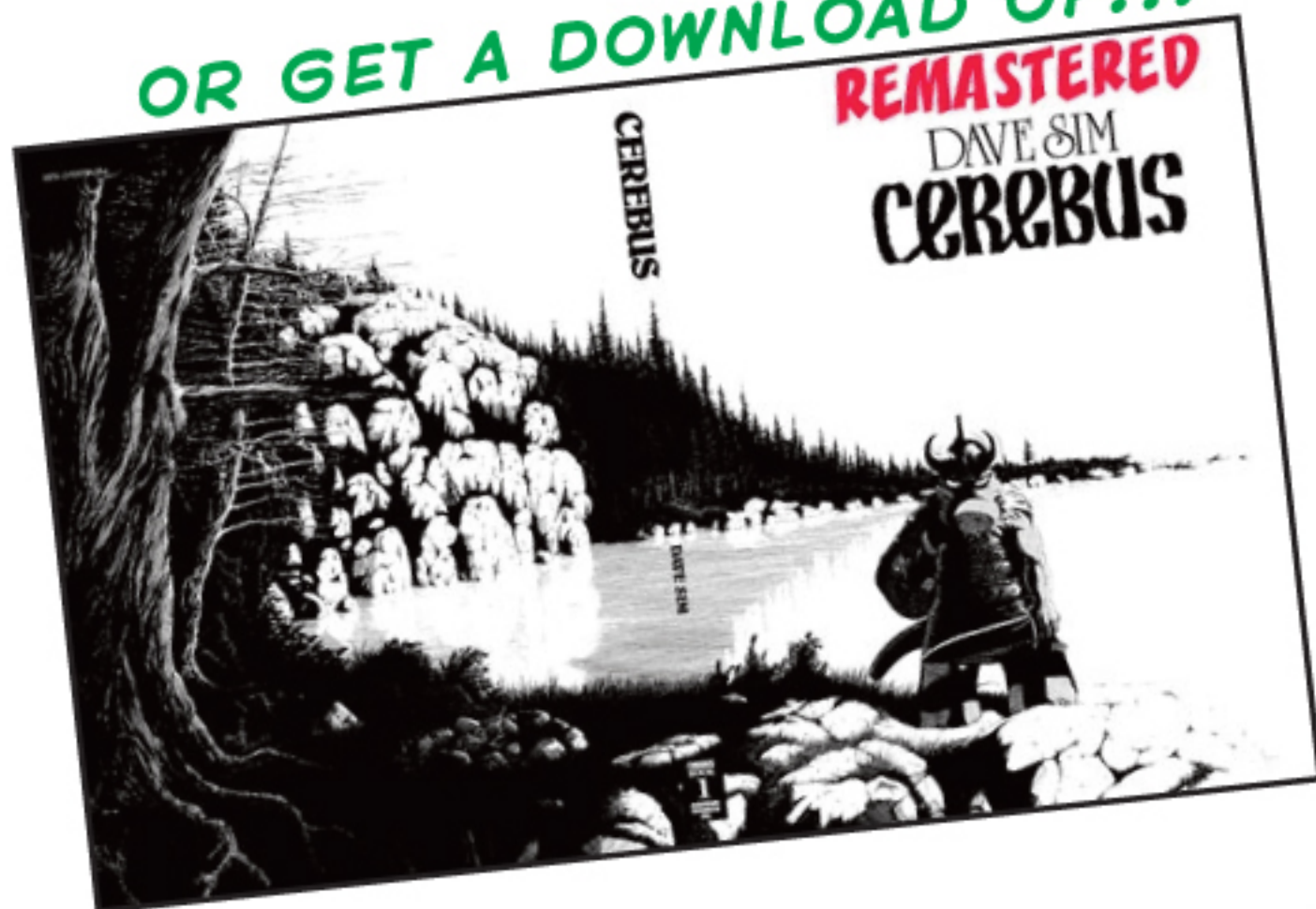
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Deni reads the Publisher's message.

OR GET A DOWNLOAD OF...



OR GET THE DOWNLOAD OF...



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WOMEN

DAVE SIM & GERHARD



I HAD A
DREAM, YOU
KNOW, DEAR.

JUST LAST
NIGHT.



A VERY OLD
MAN AND A
VERY OLD
WOMAN
CAME TO ME
...

HOLDING A
PERFECT GOLD
SPHERE BETWEEN
THEM.... WHICH
THEY OFFERED
TO ME...



AND NOW
HERE YOU
ARE.

HERE YOU
ARE.





HEH
HEH



Y'ALL
ARE JEST
TOO
EXCITED
ABOUT YO'
NEW LEADER
ROACH
...



LET'S
GIT YO'
LI'L OL'
S'PRISE
OVER
WITH
...

SO--
AH SAY--
SO WE
CAN GET
SOME WORK
DONE...



C'MON
NOW... TIME
ah say
TIME'S
A-WASTIN'



WHAT'VE
YOU ALL
GOT COOKED
UP?





This is Vera, by the way. We've become quite close over the years. She's permanently assigned as my . . . custodian is a nice word for it, I guess. She's supposed to write down everything that I say. I don't think I've said fifty words in five years so her stenographic skills are apt to be a bit rusty. Also, I imagine she's a bit worried as to how long her few wee pads of paper are going to hold out. Add to that the fact that Vera recognizes you and realizes old What's-Her-Name will want to be notified immediately of your . . . return . . . and Vera has herself a real problem. Indeed she does. If she runs to get the guards she'll miss what I have to say to you. If she stays to write down what I tell you, then you get some valuable information old What's-Her-Name would really rather you didn't have.

It's very like a chess game, isn't it, dear? And whichever way Vera turns, she finds herself stalemated; neutralized. Her primary mandate is to write down everything I say and her secondary one is to prevent me from entertaining any visitors. So, the Goddess drops you in through the skylight.

The Goddess is a wonderful chess player.

All women read minds, with very few exceptions.

It's a little more complicated than that. "Woman's intuition" is a nice way of putting it. "Women are more sensitive" is another way of putting it. A not-so-nice way of putting it is that women rape men's minds the way men rape women's bodies. It's not an exact analogy, of course, because rape is invasion and invasion is the man's way, not the woman's way; absorption and consumption are the woman's way; what they're built for. Consider the two genders; one that invades and violates and the other that absorbs and consumes. The nice way of putting it is that they're complementary. The not-so-nice way of putting it is that they deserve each other; serve each other right.


Some women are more efficient at reading minds than are others. Some only pick up impressions; they just get a "feeling" you could say. Others it's as easy as reading a book. For many of them it's like eating a piece of candy; absorbing the entirety of a mind in one gulp.





The matriarchists misinterpret, intentionally I think, the true nature of a woman. They persist in the notion that a woman must adhere to a single male, forming a family unit which they then endeavour to dominate as a superior force. This is nonsensical. The best working model for a woman's life is the beehive; a solitary queen, serviced and catered to by a diverse group of males who exist exclusively to advance her cause. Those with wealth must serve as her personal treasury; those with brawn as her soldier/warriors; those with fertile minds serve as debating adversaries, allowing her to keep sharp her mental skills and to dissect and reinforce her beliefs and theories. The woman who owns the allegiance of the wealthiest, the strongest and the most brilliant of consorts; to her pass the reigns of absolute power. Inevitably she will rise, like heavy cream through thin milk, to the very summit of human existence.

**Astoria
Kevillist Origins**



A daughter thinks her youth and beauty are timeless. I remember walking through a marketplace with one of my senior advisors and her beautiful daughter (who was then in her mid-teens). A flower-seller extended a single flower to her, with his compliments. This she accepted with only the slightest acknowledgement. My advisor said to her, "You'd better enjoy it while you can. It doesn't last forever, you know." The girl's attentions were drawn elsewhere, to a booth nearby with a display of gaudy trinkets and she ventured no reply. Now in her late twenties, needless to say, the adoring throngs of men who have surrounded her all of her life have dwindled to a handful of low and deceitful characters; charlatans, petty criminals and brigands to a one. Gone are the industrious, reliable and noteworthy suitors of days past. One of these will undoubtedly father her children someday and she will live out her days in degraded circumstances, going from unsuitable mate to unsuitable mate. Her children, when they are of an age to understand, will pity her, mock her, be disgusted by her.

The Goddess has neither mercy upon, nor patience with the willful, the proud and the self-centered woman.

Cirin
The New Matriarchy



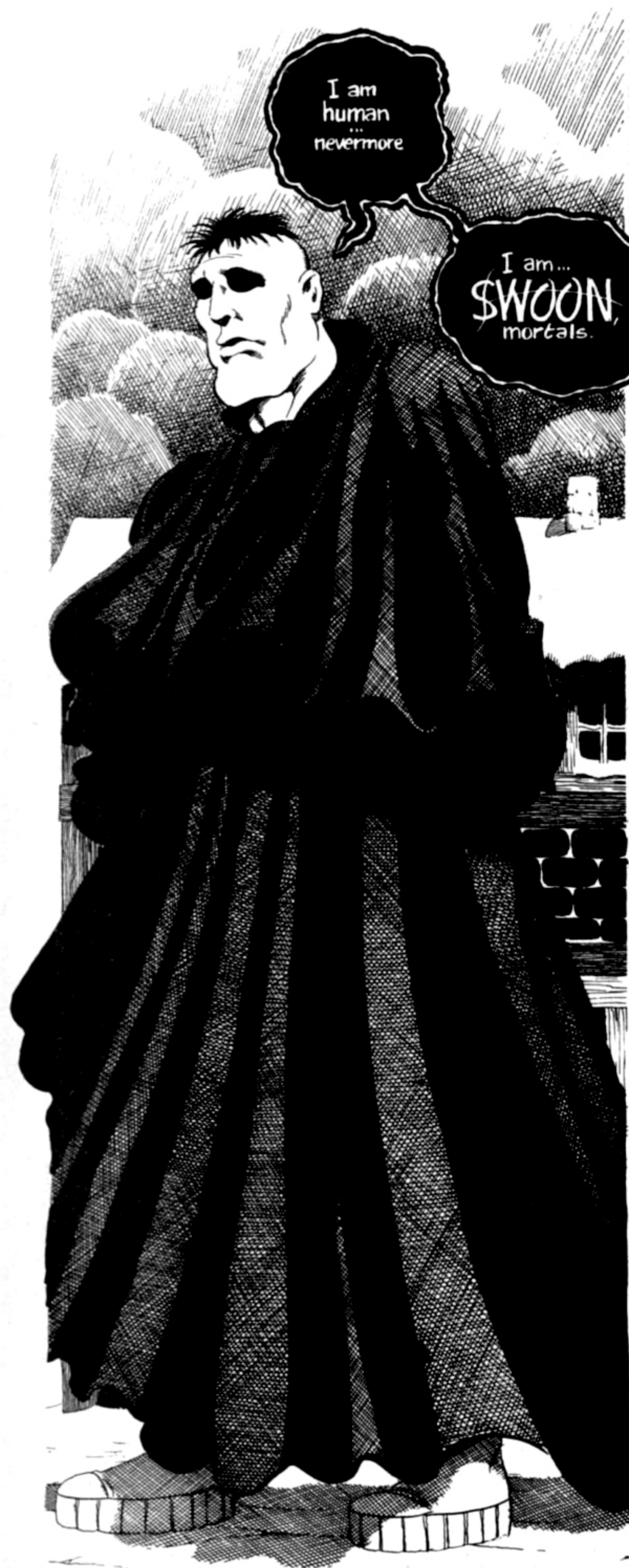
Clerk:

Very nice, but of course the drop style earring is for more formal occasions.

Astoria:

Depending on how our discussions turn out, Cirin is either going to accede to my proposals and form a coalition Cirinist/Kevillist government or she's going to throw me back in prison to rot for the rest of my life. Sounds pretty formal to me.









You have...
gained
weight,
my
sister
...

HUH?!



THIS...AH SAY
THIS IS A
COSTUME,
SON.



ONE HUNDRED
PERCENT
COTTON AND
WOOL BLEND!

INFLATABLE
BOOBS!

MAMMARY
GLANDS
THAT IS

Come.



We will
find more
suitable
attire
...

WHOA,
NOW...

AH SAY
HOLD
ON, SON...



WHAT ABOUT
THE DAWNING OF
THE AGE OF THE
BLATTIDAE
AND THE
PHYLLDROMIPAE?

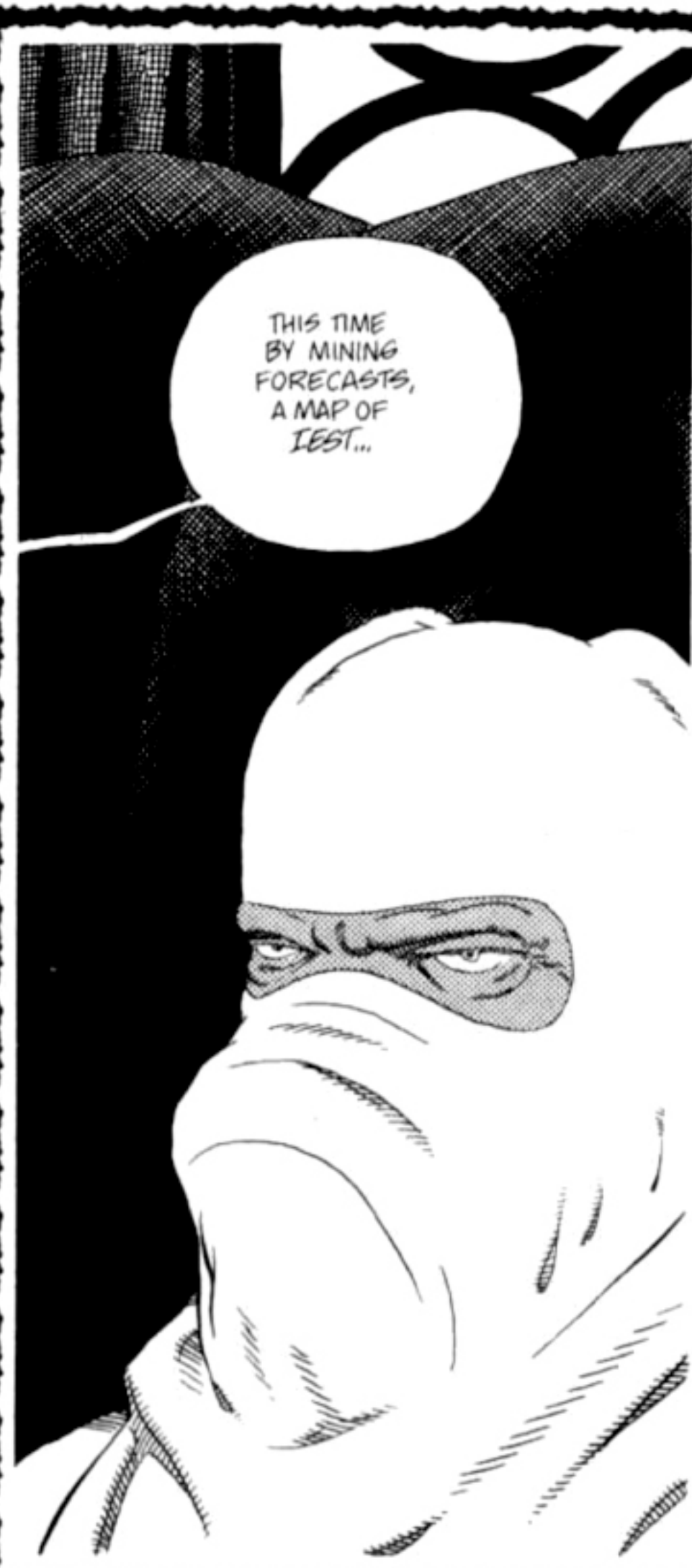
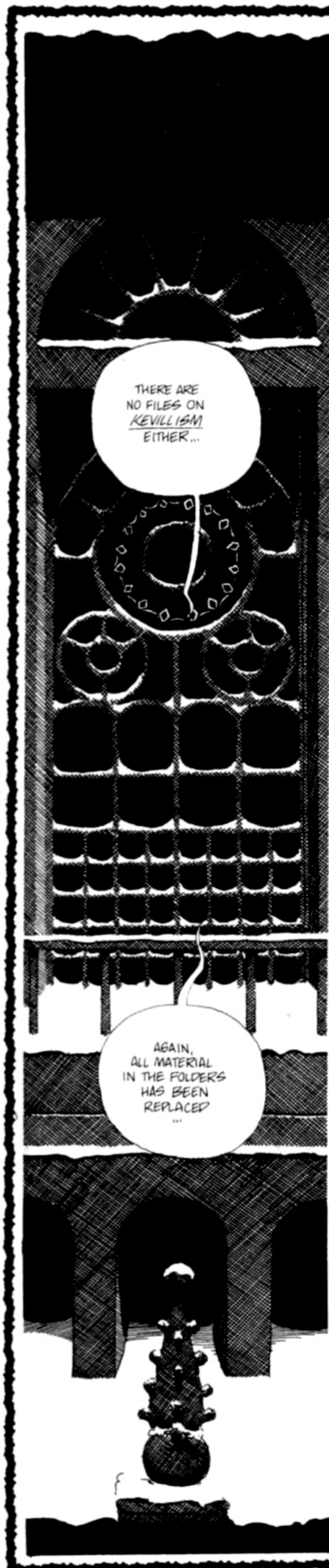
SHOULDN'T
... I SAY...
SHOULDN'T
WE...?

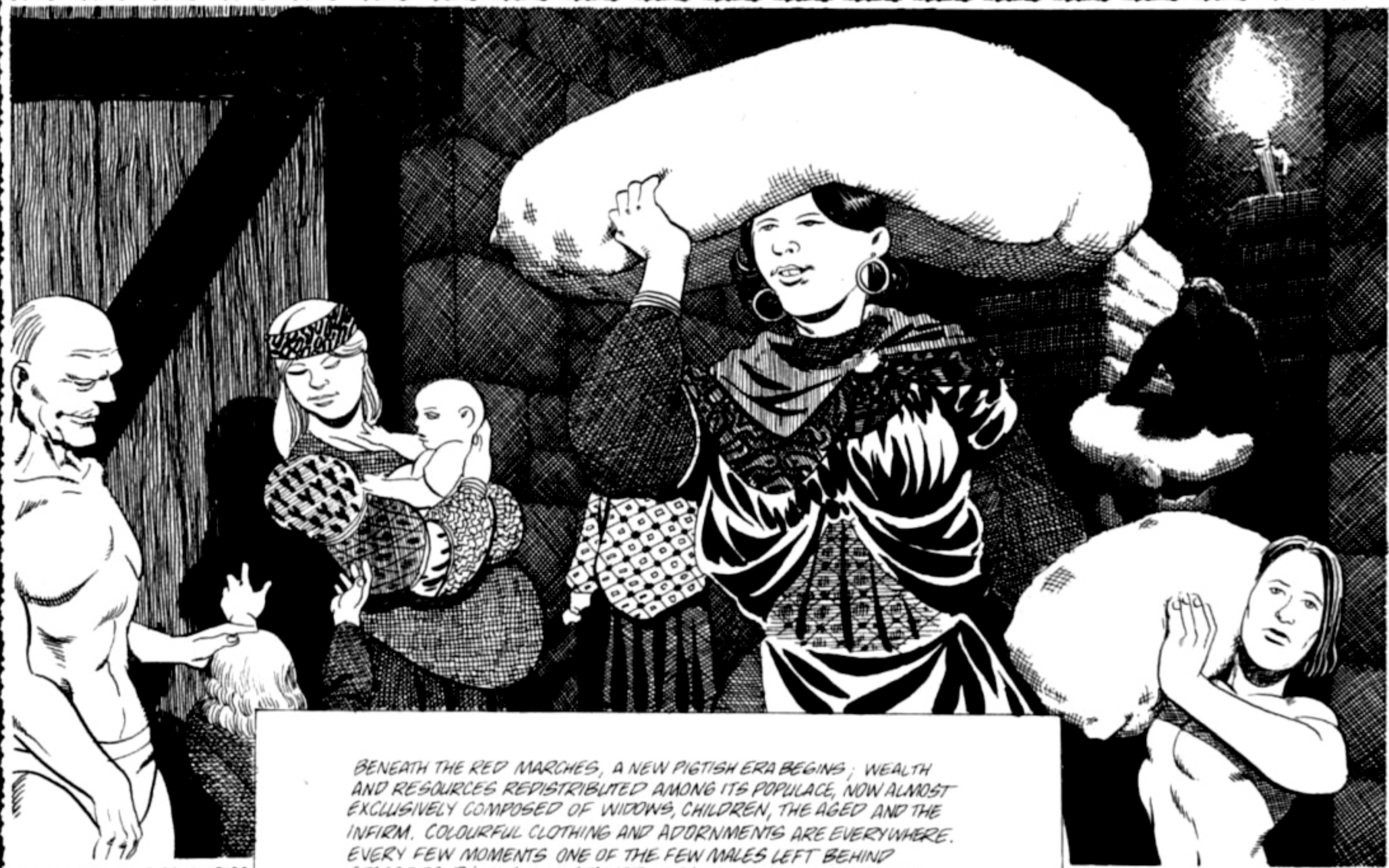
That age
is not for
many thousands
of years
...

it was
a...

misapprehension







BENEATH THE RED MARCHES, A NEW PIGTISH ERA BEGINS; WEALTH AND RESOURCES REDISTRIBUTED AMONG ITS POPULACE, NOW ALMOST EXCLUSIVELY COMPOSED OF WIDOWS, CHILDREN, THE AGED AND THE INFIRM. COLOURFUL CLOTHING AND ADORNMENTS ARE EVERYWHERE. EVERY FEW MOMENTS ONE OF THE FEW MALES LEFT BEHIND STAGGERS BY, HIS LIPS STAINED WITH WINE, SURROUNDED BY BEAUTIFUL YOUNG GIRLS. THE AIR IS MADE REDDLENT, BRIEFLY, WITH THE SMELL OF LUST AND SWEAT AND PERFUME. THE SOUND OF LAUGHTER FADES AND CONVERSATION RETURNS TO BABIES, CLOTHING AND THE NOON MEAL.





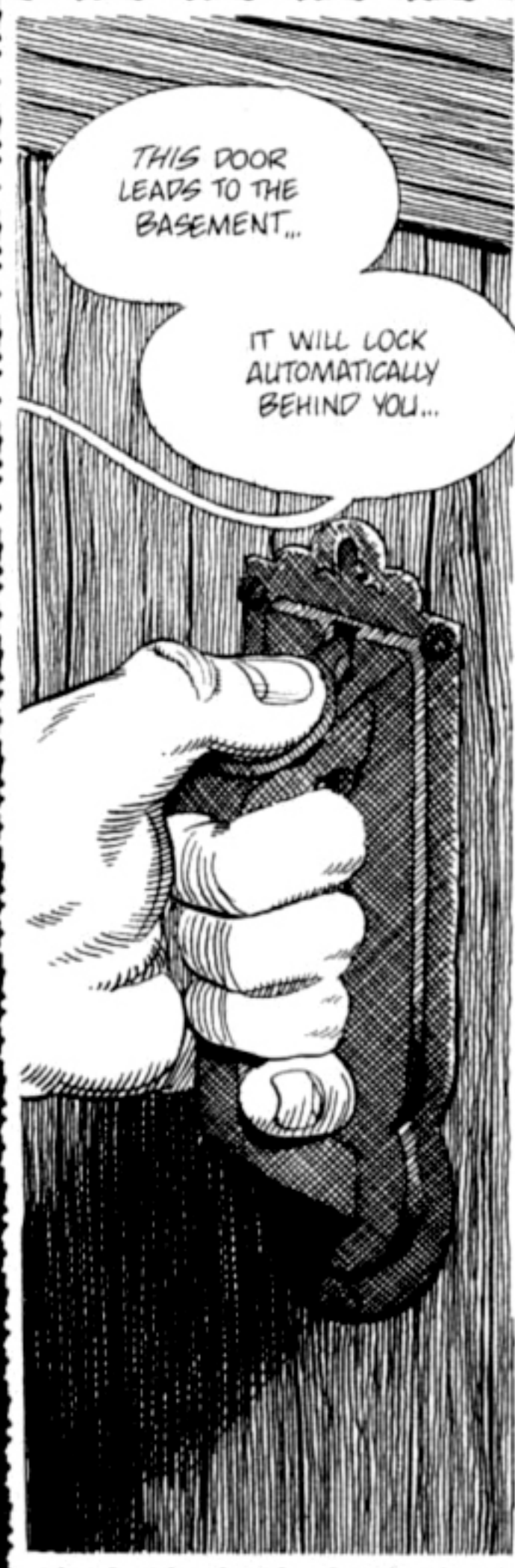
"Reading" minds isn't the worst of it. The worst of it is changing the minds they absorb; planting contrary thoughts. Changing her mind, the saying goes, is a woman's prerogative. Changing *others'* minds is a woman's darkest secret; the black cauldron of which we all partake. Some greedily, some guiltily. Some intentionally, some inadvertently. What's happened in Upper Felda; what is spreading throughout the civilised world; is an abomination. An abomination I was very helpful in bringing about and an abomination which can come to no good end. It is a very large and very dangerous force. Whose minds are being absorbed? Heads of state, business and economic and religious leaders. Whose minds are absorbing them? Unelected wives, grasping and opportunistic mistresses and concubines with handsome eyes and attractive figures. It seemed inconsequential at the outset, but mind-reading is like any other weapon of power and destruction. It will invariably gravitate to those least suited to wield it and those who are the most unscrupulous about its use. Simply put, the civilised world is being subjected to mental bullying and thuggery on a monumental scale of which it is completely



FINISH YOUR
DRINK, DEAR...

I'M AFRAID
WE'RE OUT
OF TIME...

SHE'S
GONE
TO GET
THE GUARDS
...



THIS DOOR
LEADS TO THE
BASEMENT...

IT WILL LOCK
AUTOMATICALLY
BEHIND YOU...



THERE WILL
BE A DOOR
ON YOUR LEFT
THAT LEADS
UP TO THE
HORSESHOE
TAVERN.



LIKE ALL
OTHER TAVERNS,
IT'S OFF-LIMITS
TO THE
CIRINISTS...

"MEN
ONLY"



THIS IS ENOUGH
MONEY FOR
FOOD AND
LODGING FOR
TONIGHT AND
TOMORROW
...

I WILL ARRANGE
FOR AN ACCOUNT
IN YOUR NAME
AFTER THAT...

YOU CAN STAY
THERE INDEFINITELY
IN COMPLETE
SAFETY...



HOWEVER,
IF YOU TRY
TO LEAVE
YOU'LL BE
ARRESTED
ON THE SPOT

THEY'LL
BE READY
FOR YOU
THIS
TIME,
I'M...



BAM
BAM
BAM

GOODNESS!
THEY'RE
HERE
ALREADY...

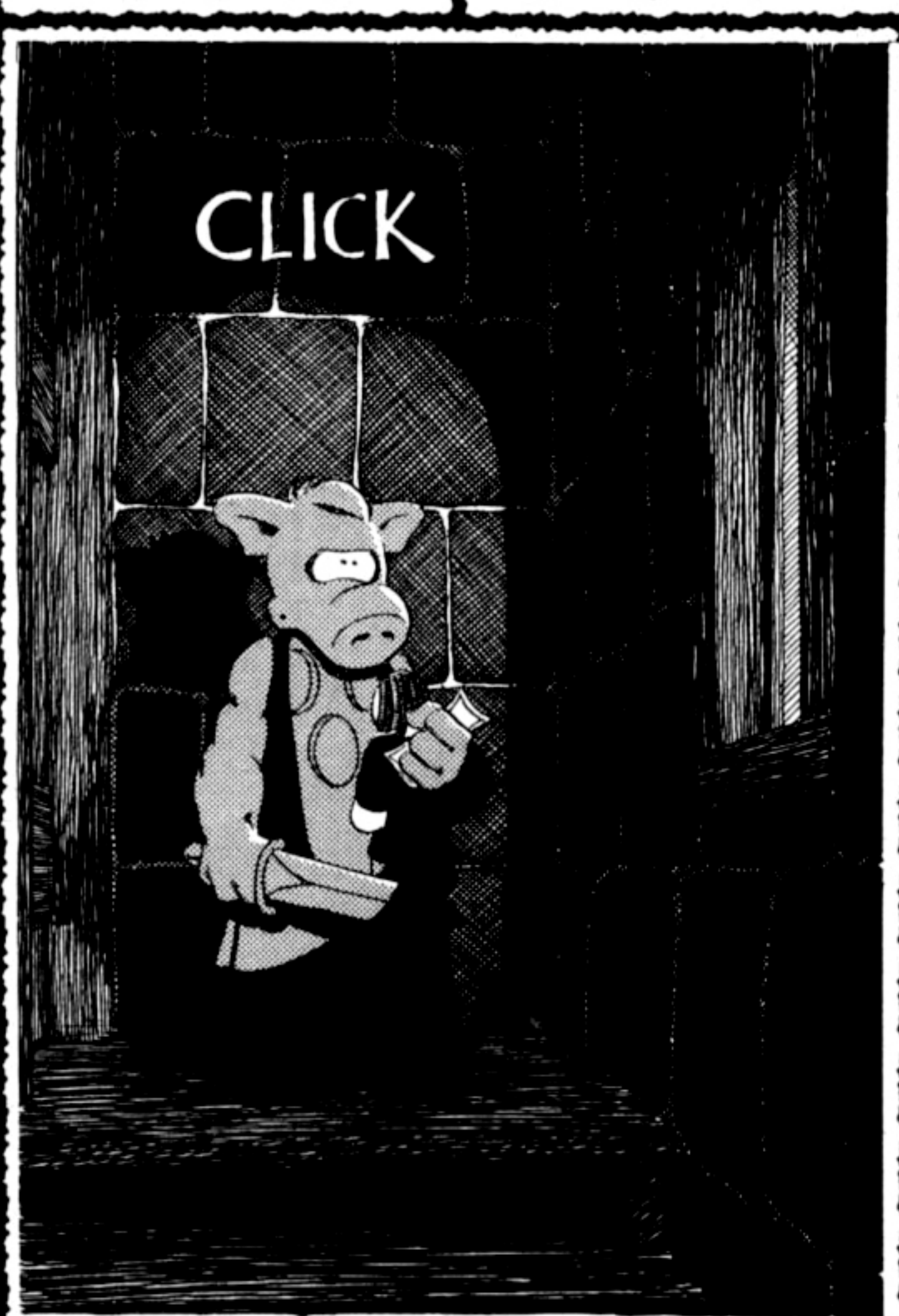


BAM
BAM

HURRY
ALONG
NOW,
DEAR



IT WAS
LOVELY
TO FINALLY
MEET
YOU...



CLICK





YOU KNOW
...ah say
YOU KNOW,
SON...

IT'S NEVAH
TOO LATE
T'SEEK
PROFESSIONAL
HELP...

MENTAL
THERAPY,
THAT IS
...

You look
...
wonderful,
my sister

Now
...

now our
real work
begins



HAR! HAR!
LOOKEE
~~HYAR~~,
DARTY
DREW!

IT'S TH'
DANG
POPE!

HEY! HEY,
POPE!
IS THET YER
DOLLEEE?

HEH! HEH!
HEH!

IS THET YER
PRETTY-PRETTY
DOLLLEEE?

HAR! HAR!

a great
battle is
imminent...

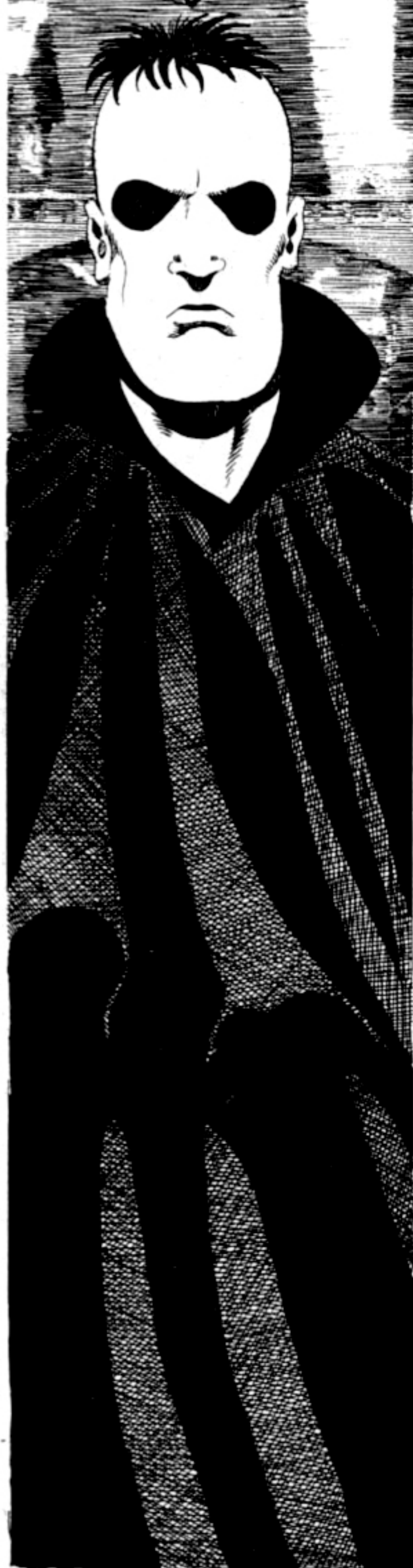
It's
outcome
uncertain...

the
survival
of
~~SWCON~~
country
depends
on you,
my
sister
~~SNuff~~

you
will
need
hundreds
of semi
automatic
cross-
bows...

when
you
lead the
defense
of our
realm...

killing
...all...
who
attempt
to
invade...



'til the
streets run
red with
Cirinist
blood...

AND
WHUT--

AH
SAY...

WHUT
ARE YOU
ALL
GOIN' T'
BE DOIN'?

I...?

I shall
stand around
looking...

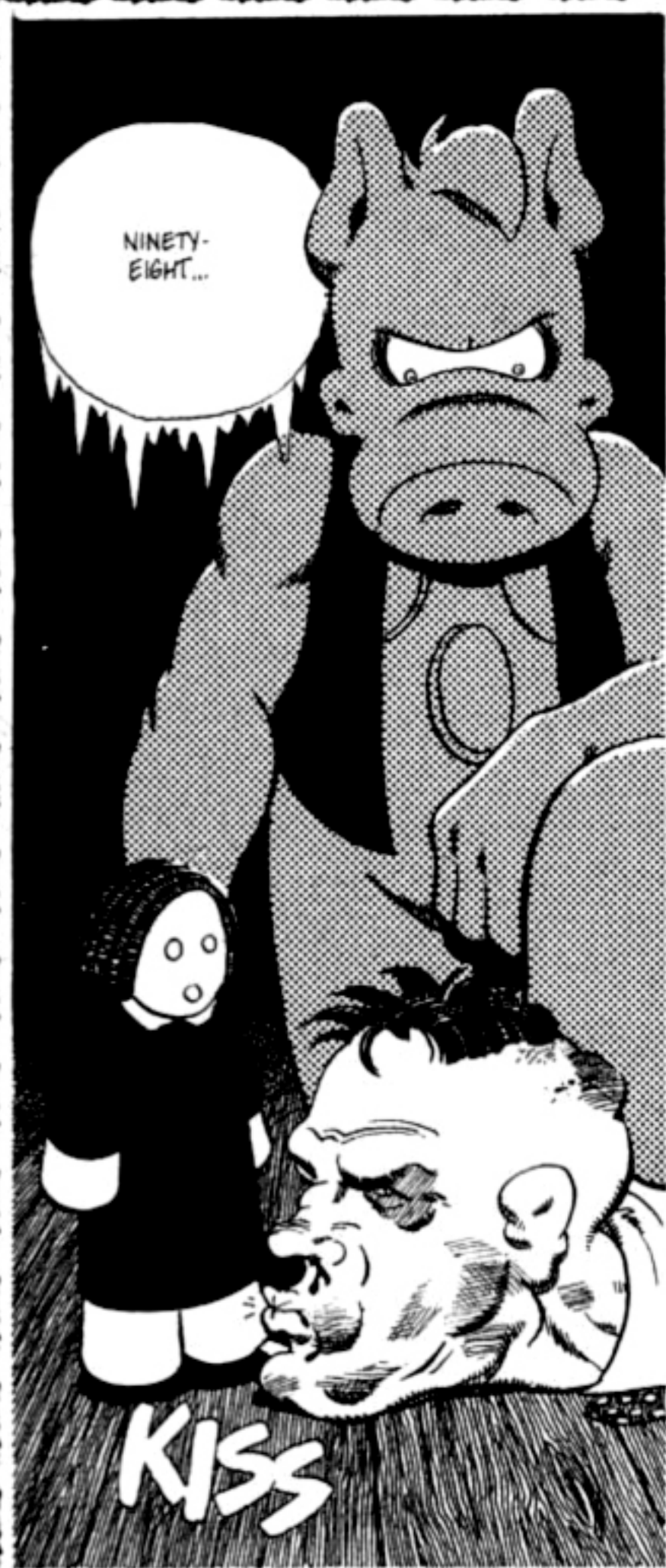
moody.

And feeling
...sorry
for
myself.

WHOA!

UN -- AH SAY --
UNHAND
YO' TESTICLES
THERE, SON

...AND RUN
THAT BY
ME AGAIN?!



FIRST, MY KNOW-
IT-ALL-WISE-GUY
EVIL TWIN DISAPPEARS

WITHOUT
EXPLANATION
OR APOLOGY...

NOW, I FIND
MYSELF STRIPPED
OF MY DIGNIFIED
ROBES OF OFFICE;
MY HAND-STITCHED
PATENT LEATHER SHOES
WITH THE CALF-SKIN
INSOLES; MY THREE-
PIECE CUSTOM-MADE
DARK-GRAY-ON-NAVY
PIN-STRIPE DOUBLE-
BREASTED SUIT
WITH HAND-WOVEN
GOLD AND BURGUNDY
SILK LINING
...

MY GOLD THREAD,
CREAM-COLOURED
ONE HUNDRED PER
CENT (LIGHTLY-
STARCHED CUFFS
AND COLLAR)
COTTON DESIGNER
LABEL SHIRT;
MY MOTHER-OF-
PEARL AND
RED GOLD
HAND-TOOLED
CUFF-LINKS
AND MATCHING
TIE PIN; MY
BLACK SILK
AND COTTON
BLEND NECK
TIE WITH
CRUSHED
VELVET
LINING
...

AGAIN!...

WITHOUT
EXPLANATION
OR APOLOGY...

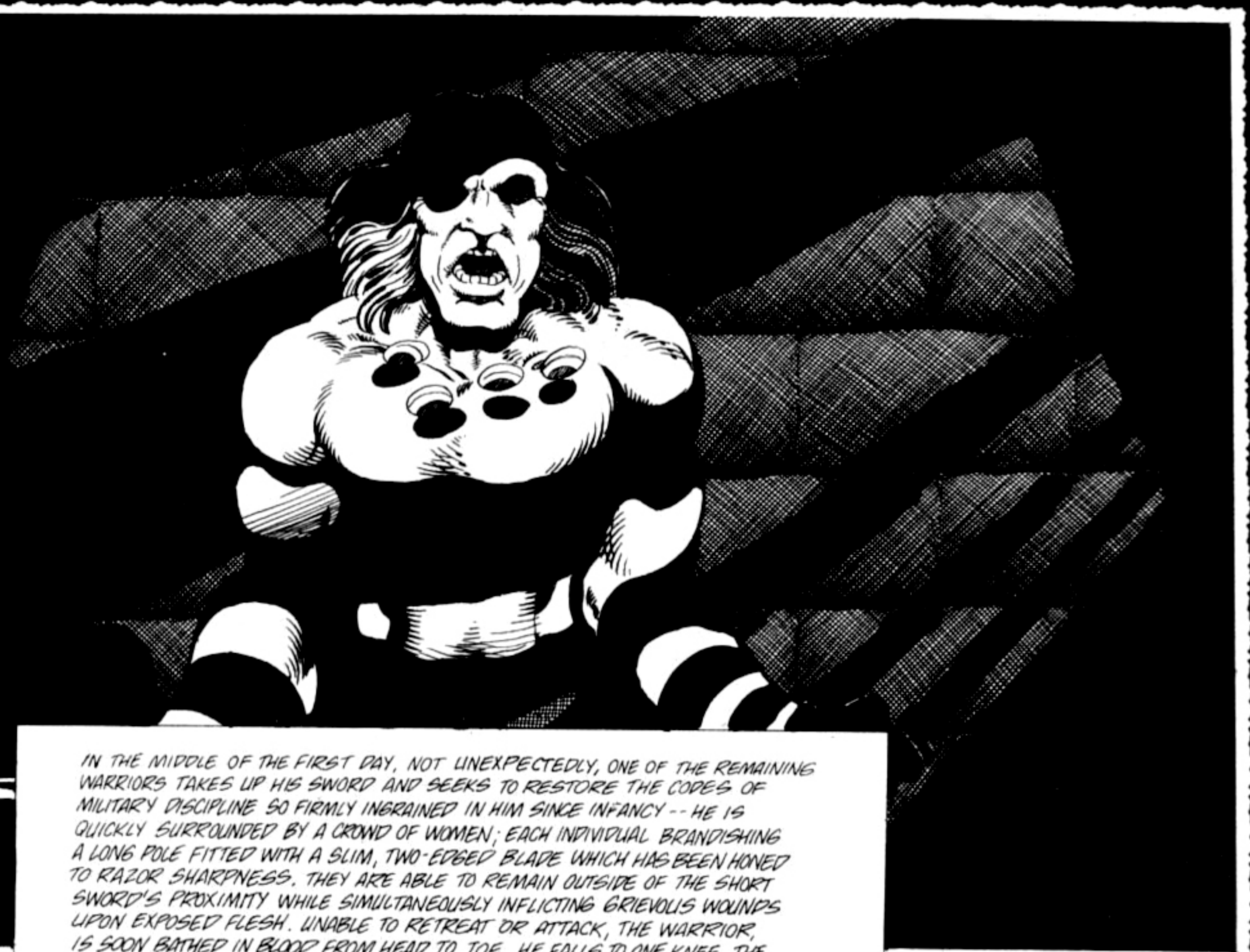
FAILING
THAT WHATEVER
MALIGNANT AND
UNSEEN FORCE
IS AT WORK HERE
SHOULD DEIGN
TO PROFFER AN
EXPLANATION

WOULD THAT
FORCE AT
LEAST OFFER
SOME SIGN
THAT THESE
UNPROVOKED
AND UNEXPLAINED
ATTACKS UPON
MY DIGNITY
ARE NOW AT
AN END?

AM I
CORRECT IN
INTERPRETING
THIS AS A
DEFINITE
"NO"?







IN THE MIDDLE OF THE FIRST DAY, NOT UNEXPECTEDLY, ONE OF THE REMAINING WARRIORS TAKES UP HIS SWORD AND SEEKS TO RESTORE THE CODES OF MILITARY DISCIPLINE SO FIRMLY INGRAINED IN HIM SINCE INFANCY -- HE IS QUICKLY SURROUNDED BY A CROWD OF WOMEN; EACH INDIVIDUAL BRANDISHING A LONG POLE FITTED WITH A SLIM, TWO-EDGED BLADE WHICH HAS BEEN HONED TO RAZOR SHARPNESS. THEY ARE ABLE TO REMAIN OUTSIDE OF THE SHORT SWORD'S PROXIMITY WHILE SIMULTANEOUSLY INFLECTING GRIEVOUS WOUNDS UPON EXPOSED FLESH. UNABLE TO RETREAT OR ATTACK, THE WARRIOR, IS SOON BATHED IN BLOOD FROM HEAD TO TOE. HE FALLS TO ONE KNEE, THE TRIUMPHANT SHRIEKING LAUGHTER RINGING IN HIS EARS. THEN, EVERYTHING SEEMS TO SLIP AWAY AND HIS CONSCIOUSNESS FADES





DO YOU
UNDERSTAND
WHAT I'M
SAYING...?

YOU
COULD
BE A GREAT
FORCE FOR
GOOD.

EVEN
NOW.

JUST
ASK
FORGIVENESS

CIRIN IS
VERY
FORGIVING
OF HUMAN
ERROR

SHE'S
LOST
ALREADY

AND
SHE KNOWS
IT.

AYE?

WHAT
WAS
THAT?

NOTHING.

JUST
THINKING
OUT LOUD.



General Greer:
Well, we don't know. We have the transcript from Vera and we know he's in the tavern.

Cirin:
You're certain of that.

General Greer:
Yes. Well, yes and no. We've only observed him in limited interaction with others, so there's a real possibility that he's just an illusion.

General Dworkin:
We have our best-equipped troops stationed there, now, so he can't take us by surprise this time. They're heavily armoured so his sword won't do him much good if he isn't an illusion.

General Greer:
Then there's the doll.

General Dworkin:
Oh, yes. I almost forgot. He's holding a doll, which no one mentioned during the last . . . sighting. A plain rag doll.

Cirin:
A doll.

General Greer:
Yes, we think it might be a provocative gesture on the part of the Illusionists, since it is obviously a maternal symbol. Of course if he's real and he's still a Kevillist, the symbolism is even more significant in that he's holding it in a protective manner and he's already forced one of the tavern residents to pay homage to it.

Cirin:
Homage to a maternal symbol. That doesn't sound like a Kevillist.

General Dworkin:
No, it doesn't; which leads us back to the Illusionists. Someone even suggested that he might have come over to our side.

General Greer:
That's pretty far-fetched.

General Dworkin:
I agree. It's so unexpected and confusing that it would seem to point to Illusionism.

General Greer:
Or Lord Julius. It's the sort of thing he would come up with. Maybe they're still connected in some way.

Cirin:
A maternal symbol. And he's not doing anything?

General Greer:
Just sitting and drinking an ale.

Cirin:
Unbelievable. It must mean something.

General Greer:
Do you want us to go in and get him?

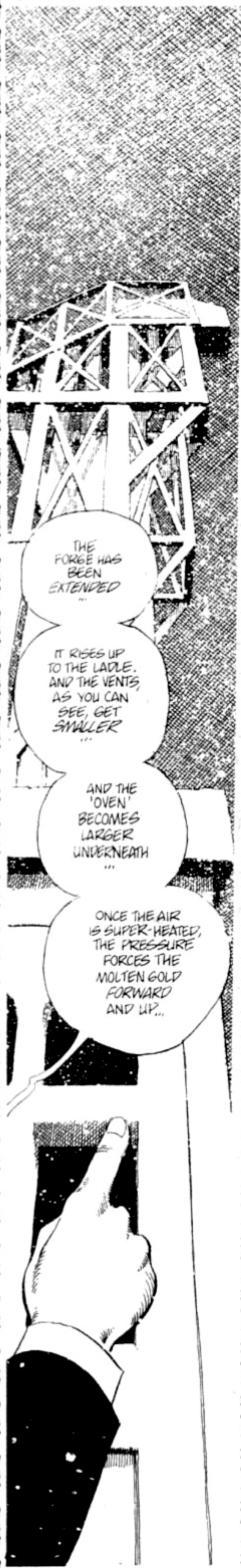
Cirin:
No. The Alcohol Sanction shouldn't be violated. The Illusionists are just trying to provoke us into breaking our own rules so they can use it to fuel an insurgency.

General Greer:
He's murdered a number of mothers, though. Soldiers.

General Dworkin:
He's an illusion. He has to be. If he isn't, how do you explain the doll?

Cirin:
We'll leave him there for the time being. Monitor his conversations. Wait the Illusionists out. They're getting careless. The ascension is at hand. There's no way they can stop it at this point. They're just trying to break our concentration.

General Greer:
Yes. Yes, of course. That must be it.



THE
FORGE HAS
BEEN
EXTENDED
...

IT RISES UP
TO THE LADLE.
AND THE VENTS,
AS YOU CAN
SEE, GET
SMALLER
...

AND THE
'OVEN'
BECOMES
LARGER
UNDERNEATH
...

ONCE THE AIR
IS SUPER-HEATED,
THE PRESSURE
FORCES THE
MOLTEN GOLD
FORWARD
AND UP...



WE STARTED TO
DESIGN AN
AIR-TIGHT BONNET
FOR THE LADLE
...

AND THEN WE
REALIZED THAT
WE COULD
ELIMINATE
THE LADLE
ENTIRELY...

WITH THE SYSTEM
OF 'LOCKS' WITHIN
THE EXTENDED
FORGE, THE
PROBLEMS OF
KEEPING THE
GOLD LIQUID
AND
ELIMINATING
IMPURITIES
ARE SOLVED
WITH A
SINGLE
MODIFICATION
...

IT'S
INGENIOUS
...

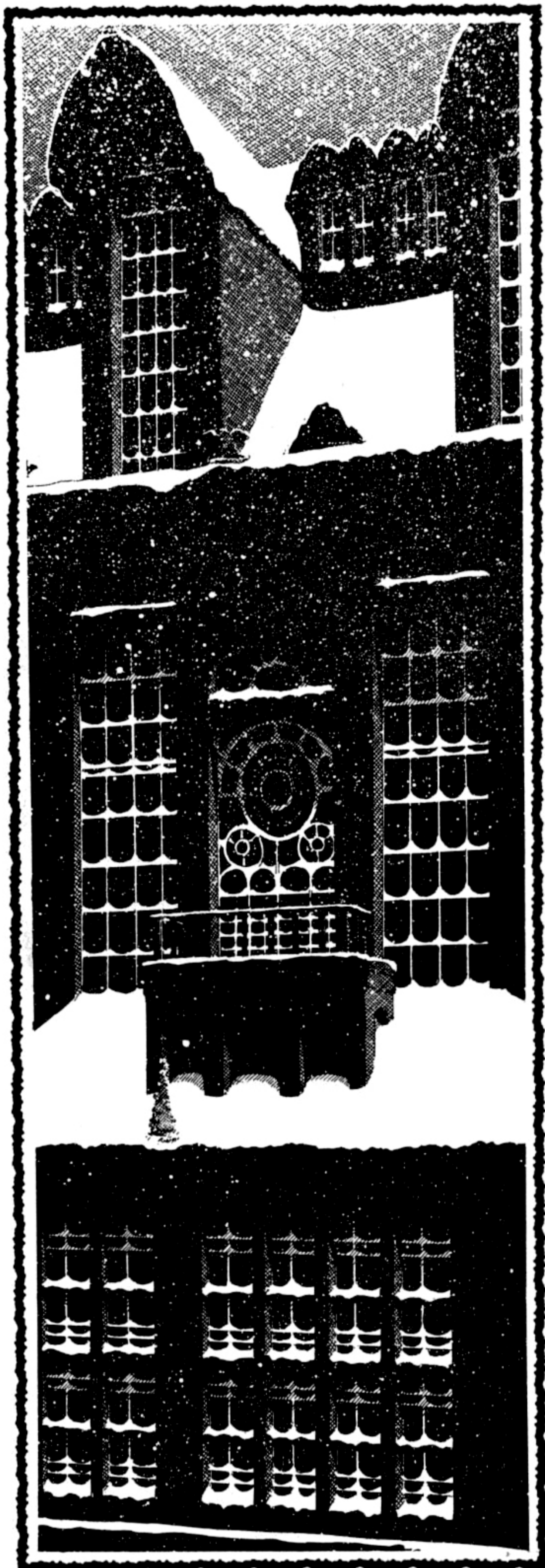


AND WHICH
OF YOUR
STAFF
CAME UP
WITH THIS?
...



NO
ONE.

THAT'S THE
EXTRAORDINARY
THING -- IT WAS
ALL HALF-
CONSTRUCTED
IN SKELETAL
FORM WHEN
WE GOT HERE
THIS MORNING
...



Mrs. Hayes:
Mrs. Thatcher is down there now
with Hammond.

Cirin:
It has to be an illusion. Things
don't construct themselves
like that.

Mrs. Mills:
The designers are beside
themselves. You know all of the
qualifying they were doing about
the purity of the sphere? Ninety
percent . . . ninety-five per cent.
They aren't qualifying it any
more. It makes me suspicious.

Mrs. Hayes:
It's ironic — we kept telling them
that they could do it and make it
one hundred percent pure and
they were the ones who were
doubtful. Now they're confident
that it can be done and we're the
ones with doubts.

Cirin:
We just have to trust that the
Goddess is guiding the
construction.

Mrs. Hayes:
But if it's the Illusionists —
if the expanded forge isn't really
there . . .

Mrs. Mills:
It's just a skeleton of wood; one
step beyond a blueprint, really.
If the principle is sound; and all
of the designers and technicians
say it is; then it doesn't matter if
the skeleton is an illusion. The
forge itself will be real.

Mrs. Hayes:
But what if the principle is an
illusion? I never understood the
mechanics of it in the first place.
What would prevent the
Illusionists from making the
technicians see some miraculous
new construction idea that is
fundamentally unsound?

Mrs. Mills:
The fact that it's two elements
instead of three worries me. First,
we needed a mold, a forge and a
ladle. Now they're telling us that
the ladle is unnecessary. Three
elements constitute a queen.
Two elements is a priestess.

Cirin:
Unstable.

Mrs. Mills:
It's so Astoria, it squeaks.

Cirin:
You forgot the gold itself.
That means it was four elements
before; mold, forge, ladle and
gold. A king. Now it's three
elements; mold, forge and gold.

Mrs. Mills:
Praise the Goddess.

Cirin:
Doubt is going to be our greatest
foe as the ascension approaches.
We must trust in the Goddess
absolutely.

Mrs. Hayes:
Yes, Great Cirin. Of course,
you're right.





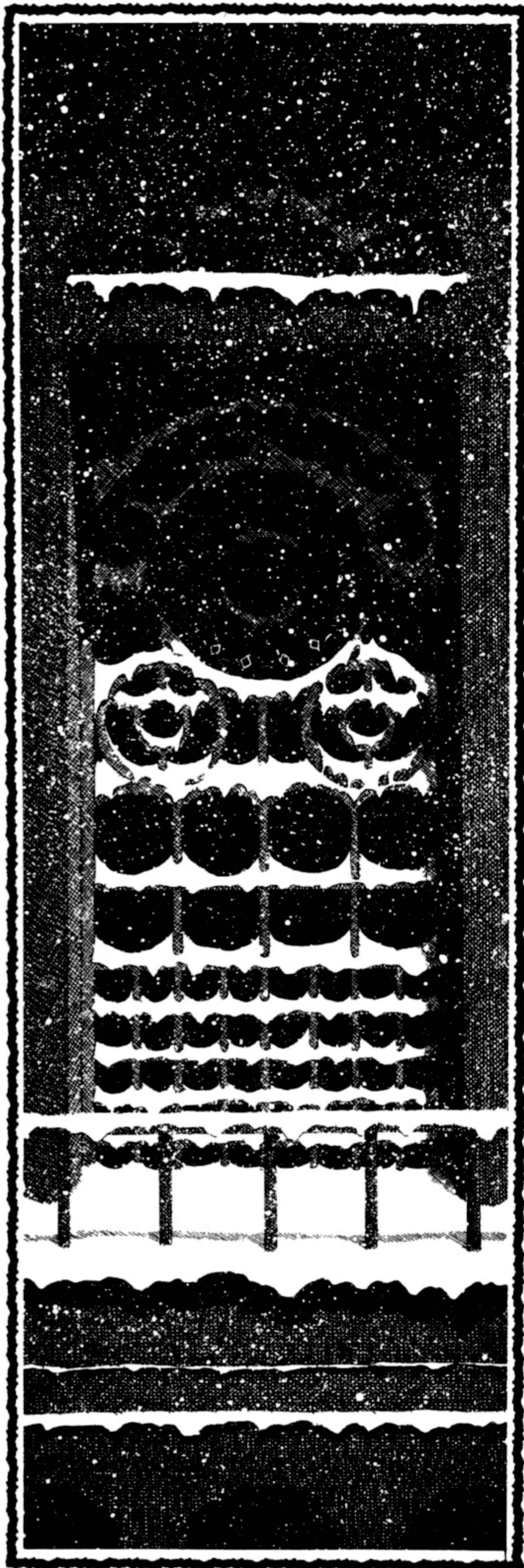
The Alcohol Sanction is called into question frequently by many sincere followers of our creed. It falls into the same category as prostitution in our view. That which cannot be eliminated must be sequestered. The consumption of alcohol, once isolated from the general community, permits those self-destructive and troublesome elements within the male population to hasten their own demise. Since no one is permitted to leave a licensed establishment until entirely sober, each tavern becomes an effective prison to those unable or unwilling to forego inebriation as a state of perpetual existence. If a husband is absent for three consecutive days owing to intoxication, his marriage is automatically dissolved and his possessions seized and distributed for the general benefit of his own and other needy families. He then becomes a tavern "resident", provided with alcohol and a subsistence diet and mean accommodation for the rest of his days. The average life expectancy of one of these individuals is six to eight months. Indisputably, wives find the enforced separation to be a great trial, but in a majority of cases, they will choose their subsequent life-mate with greater care and less emotion, and will find a reliable provider for themselves and their children.

Cirin
The New Matriarchy



One of the few matriarchal programs with which I heartily concur is the Alcohol Sanction. It should be noted that the Sanction was devised only when a general prohibition proved completely unworkable. I do feel, however, that the taverns should be accessible to the general female population, as well. Illicit consumption of alcohol among homemakers, the trading of sexual favours for smuggled alcohol, as well as a proliferation of illegal distillation in Upper Felda's kitchens, is glossed over to an unconscionable degree. Alcoholism is destructive of societal progress wherever it occurs and the sooner the vice can be bred out of every aspect of male and female existence, the sooner true and meaningful progress can be achieved.

Astoria
Kevillist Origins



General Greer:
First, the signs have been changed from "Roachland" to "Swoon Country". Again, we have no idea what that means.

General Dworkin:
We've been able to scan nothing of Skull man. As per our discussions late last night, we decided to send in a reconnaissance group over the rooftops. There's a young woman who seems to have the same kind of weapons that Skull man used on the first assault team.

Cirin:
A woman?

General Dworkin:
Yes. Very young; wearing the sacred symbol. Dressed entirely in black. We tried to monitor her thoughts and drew a blank.

Cirin:
She's screening, then?

General Dworkin:
Evidently.

Cirin:
Kevillist?

General Dworkin:
That would be our best guess. We have no idea how she knew our people were on the roof, but she took them all out with pinpoint accuracy. Twenty dead.

Cirin:
Dead are confirmed?

General Greer:
Yes. No chance of it being an illusion.

General Dworkin:
She has a companion. A large man in black robes. Both are described as extremely pale-skinned. We haven't been able to scan him either. Except for one word. "Blossom".

Cirin:
Sounds like an ascension reference.

General Greer:
Blossom. Exactly.

General Dworkin:
I'd like to recommend an all-out assault, but at this point it would be highly inadvisable. First, we don't know where Skull man is hiding and we have to assume he's still there and fully armed. And we have no idea at this point who else is down there.

Cirin:
So your recommendation is . . . ?

General Dworkin:
Hold the perimeter as we've been doing, but bring in some cross-bows and make it a little more secure; sand-bags, pike and what-not. We're still not letting anyone in, but we'd like to make sure that they don't break out of the confined area.

Cirin:
Yes. Immediately.
Good thinking.



SO! WAD
DYEW BOYCE
WAND FOOR...?

SHH!

LOOKEE
YONDER...
TH' POPE'S
A-SLEEPIN'
...

HE EES
STEEL DE
PUP...?

'COURSE 'E IS,
IRJIT... 'E
DINT GIT
IMPEACHED
DID 'E?

'R WHUDEVER
IT IS YUH DO
WHEN Y'GIT
RID OF A
POPE...

HE EES
STEEL HULDING
HEES SWORT

MEBBE HE AIN'T
REALLY ASLEEP.
MEBBE 'E'S
JEST PERTENDIN'

SHHHH

SHHHH



THAR
Y'GO...

AH TOLD
YUH HE
WUZNT
SLEEPIN'

I THEENK
HE EES... HE
EES SLIP
WUKEEN

WUDDID
HE SLIP
IN? AH
MISSED
SOMETHIN'

NUH
NUH

SLIP

WUKKIN

HE EES
FEST
ASLIP

WUKKIN'
IN HIS
SLIP...

OH

MEBBE WE
SHOULD WAKE
HIM UP...

Y'U DUNT
UNPAIRSTEND
-- I SED DUNT
WAK HEEM

AH HEARD
YUH TH' FARST
TIME, VARMIN'T
AN AH TOLD
YUH...

AH
AIN'T
GONNA
WHACK
'IM

THES
GOOT.

NUH! NEVAIR
WACK A SLIP
WUCKER

VER'
DENGEROOSE

AH WUZNT
GONNA WHACK
'IM

AH WUZ
JEST A- GONNA
NUDGE 'IM
A BIT...

HE'S GOTTEN
UP AND HE
IS NOW MOVING
TO THE RIGHT
REAR OF THE
TAVERN
...

WE ARE OBSERVING
THE SLEEPING QUARTERS
SECOND FLOOR... HE
SHOULD ROUND
THE CORNER IN
JUST A MOMENT

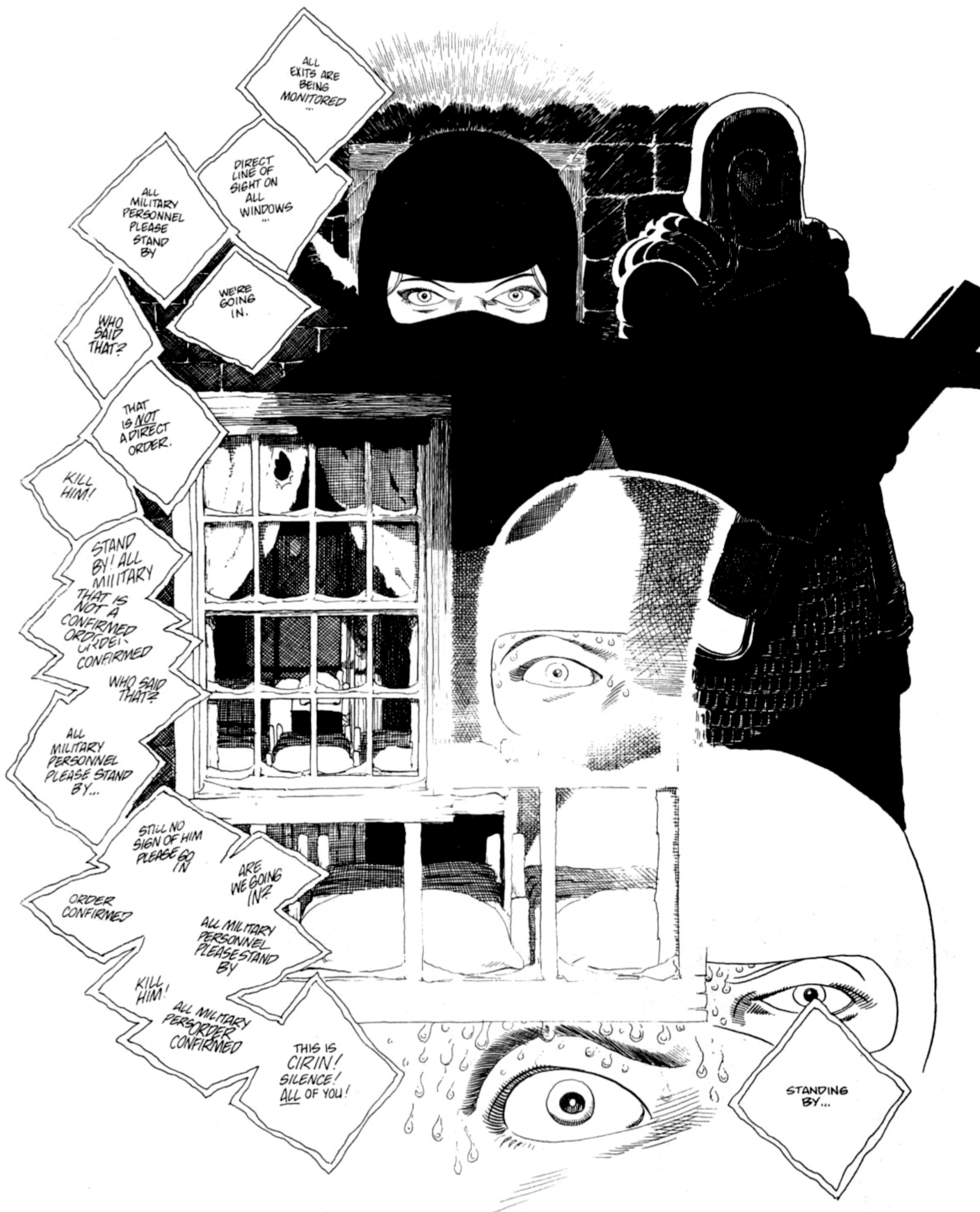
CIRIN HAS
BEEN ALERTED
MAINTAIN YOUR
OBSERVATION
ALL MILITARY
PERSONNEL
STAND BY
PLEASE
...

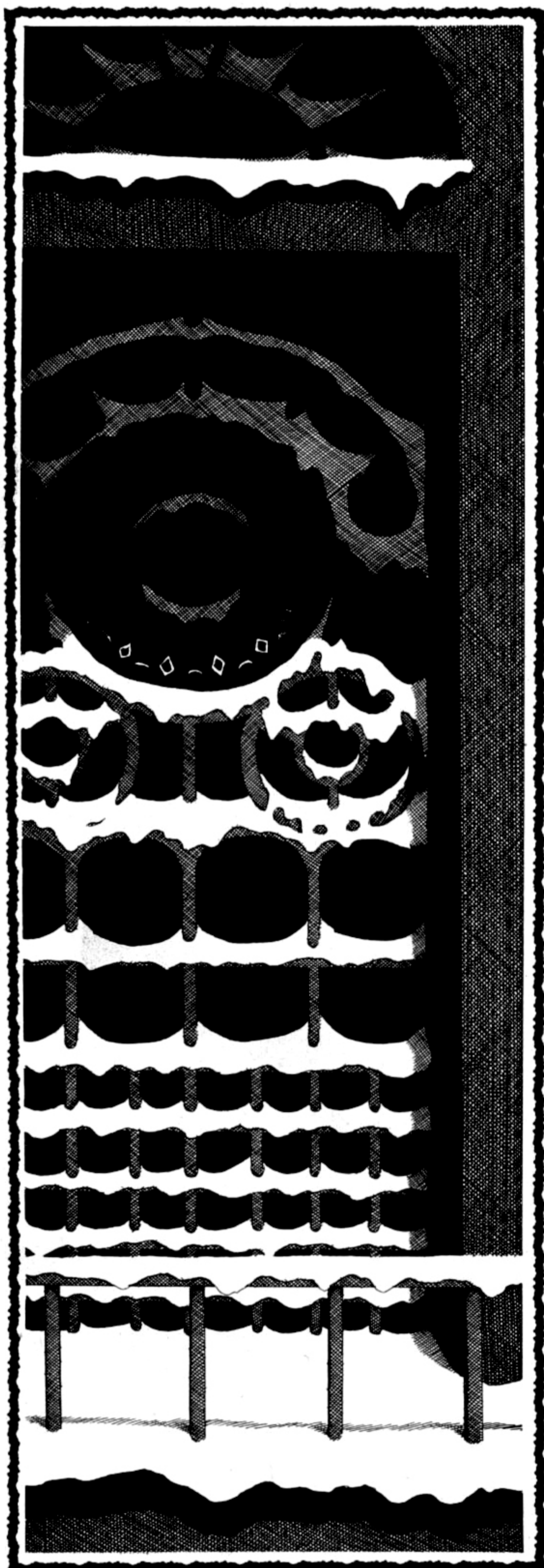
HE'S ASCENDING
THE REAR STAIRS
WE ARE ABOUT
TO LOSE DIRECT
LINE OF SIGHT
CONTACT...

MILITARY
PERSONNEL
STAND BY,
PLEASE

NO SIGN OF HIM ON THE
SECOND FLOOR... NO SIGN
AT ALL. WE ARE MAINTAINING
OBSERVATION. GREAT CIRIN
I THINK WE HAVE A
PROBLEM...







General Greer:
Great Cirin, I think
... I strongly
recommend that
we go in.

Cirin:
And if he's just
standing on the
steps up to the
second floor?
Or if he was just
an illusion?

General Greer:
I just don't think
we can afford the
risk. If we can't see
him ...

Cirin:
A few dozen
armoured soldiers
breaking into a
quiet little tavern
in a quiet little
neighbourhood?
You'd make us a
laughing-stock ...

General Greer:
But if he's ... if
he's actually the ...
if he's the one that
they've all been ...
waiting for ...

Cirin:
A folk tale. A lower
City folk tale and
that's going to be
your reason to
violate the Alcohol
Sanction. I thought
you had a little
more back-bone
than that, General.

General Greer:
I'm not saying that
he is. Far from it.
But if they believe
that he is. I don't
really see how we
can ... I think the
risk ...

Cirin:
I think we are all
going to be better
served by con-
centrating on the
True Ascension
and remaining
calm. Panicking
over a folk tale is
hardly going to
assist us in that,
is it, General.

General Greer:
Great Cirin, I just
mean to ...

Cirin:
Is. It.

General Greer:
No, Great Cirin. I'm
sorry. You're right,
of course. Praise
the Goddess.





Cirin:
I'm going to say
this to all of you,
and I am only
going to say it
once. This panic
has got to stop.
This panic *will*
stop. He is not
behaving in any
manner that we
might have
anticipated. That
only increases the
likelihood that he
is an illusion; pure
and simple. Do
you understand
me? You are to
maintain observa-
tion. There is
nothing compli-
cated or difficult
about that order,
now is there? If he
starts making a
speech, you are
authorized to go
in. Nothing too
complicated or
difficult about that,
either, is there?
We are nearing the
day of the Final
Ascension.
Everything is
running very, very
smoothly. You are
Soldiers of the
Goddess. I expect
you to behave as
such. If I become
aware of any one
of you behaving
like some weak,
snivelling . . .

General Greer:
Great Cirin.

Cirin:
How dare you
interrupt me. That
is exactly the sort
of . . .

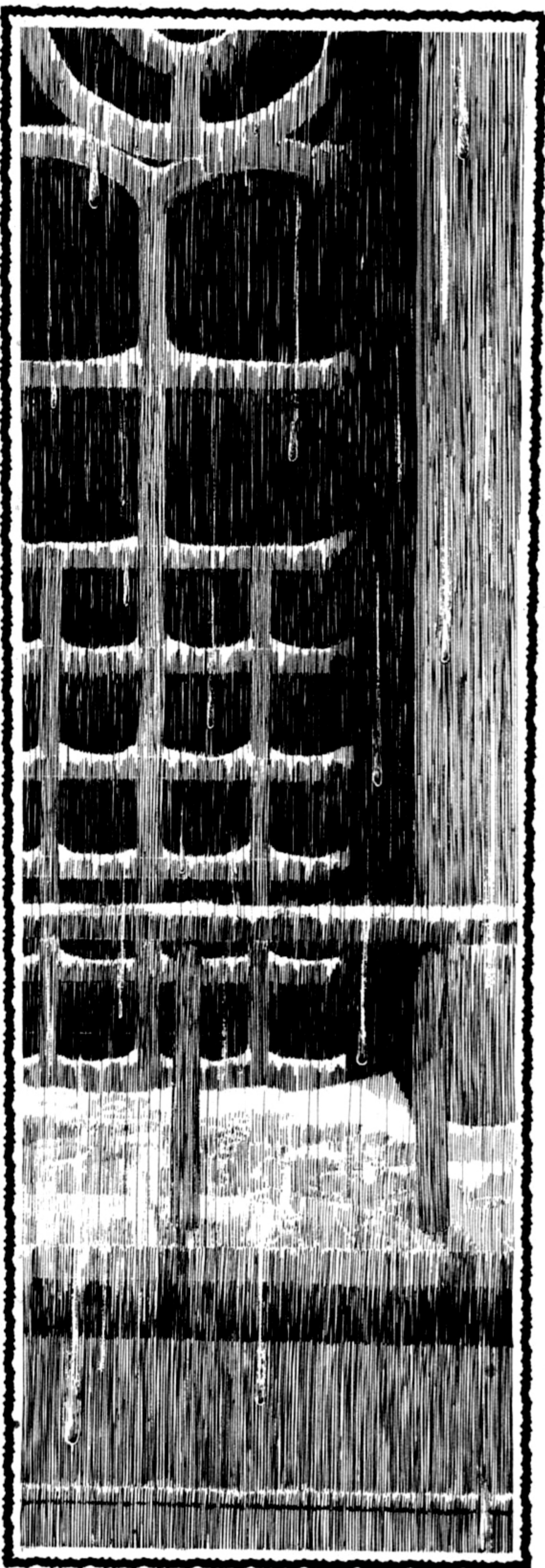
General Greer:
Great Cirin, look
outside.


Cirin:
It's raining. Yes.
By the Goddess
are you now afraid
of a little . . .

General Greer:
The Tower,
Great Cirin.

Cirin:
The Tower?
What about
the . . .

Cirin:
Oh. Oh my.





In the history of Iest, there have been several attempts, some real, some illusory, at an ascension into heaven. In each case, the individual attempting that ascension has been male. In each case, the Tower has risen erratically, and has been structurally unsound. In each case, it has then collapsed on the Lower City, causing massive destruction, nearly unimaginable loss of life and injury. This, then, is the surest sign that exists of the Goddess' intolerance of male-dominated, male-directed society. It will be a mother who ascends, when the time comes. And that time will be soon. The Goddess will reach down to us, even as we reach up to Her. When that glorious connection is made; when that wondrous day arrives; the long-promised Golden Age will dawn and our successes and triumphs in Upper Felda will pale by comparison; mere flint, mere stone, mere spark, beside the miraculous, world-wide Blaze of Glory that is yet-to-be.

Cirin
The New Matriarchy

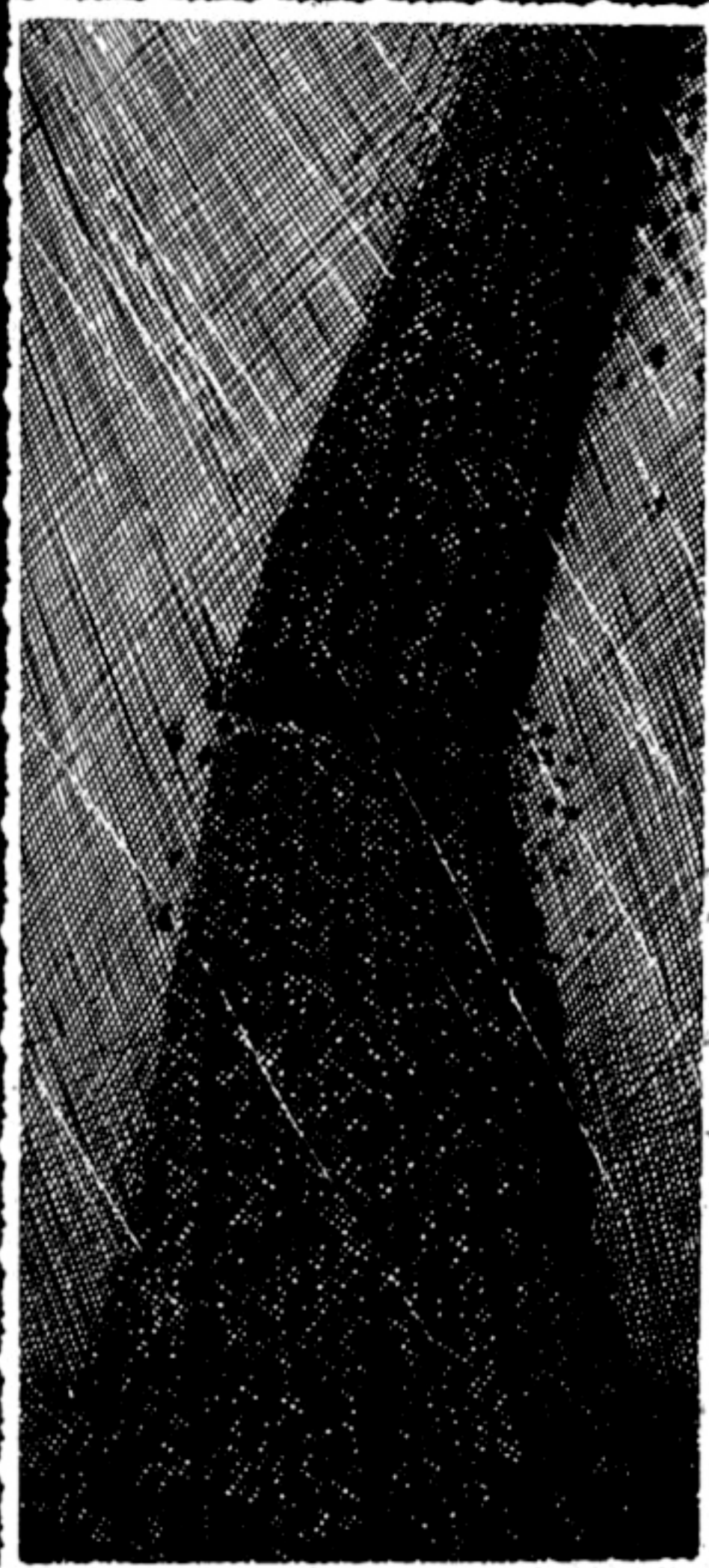
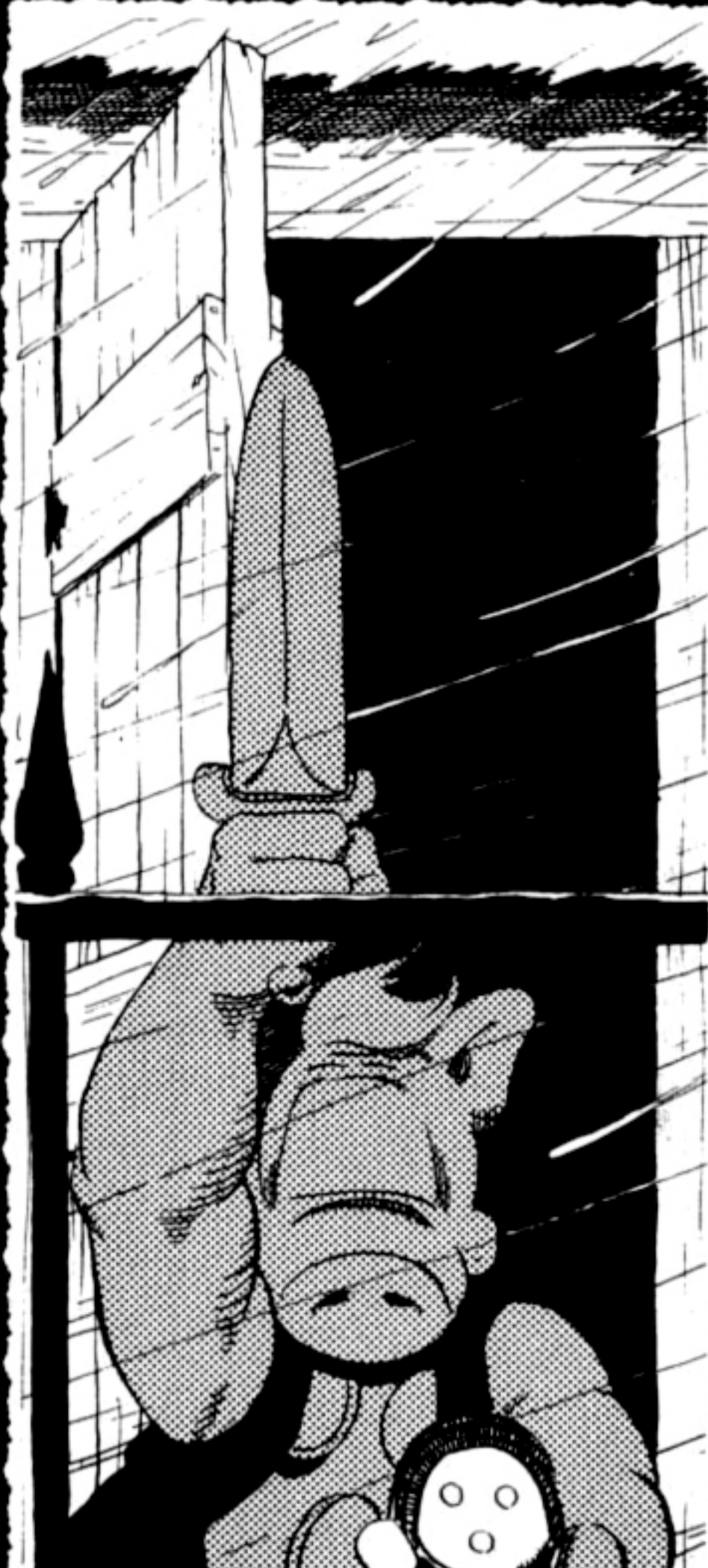
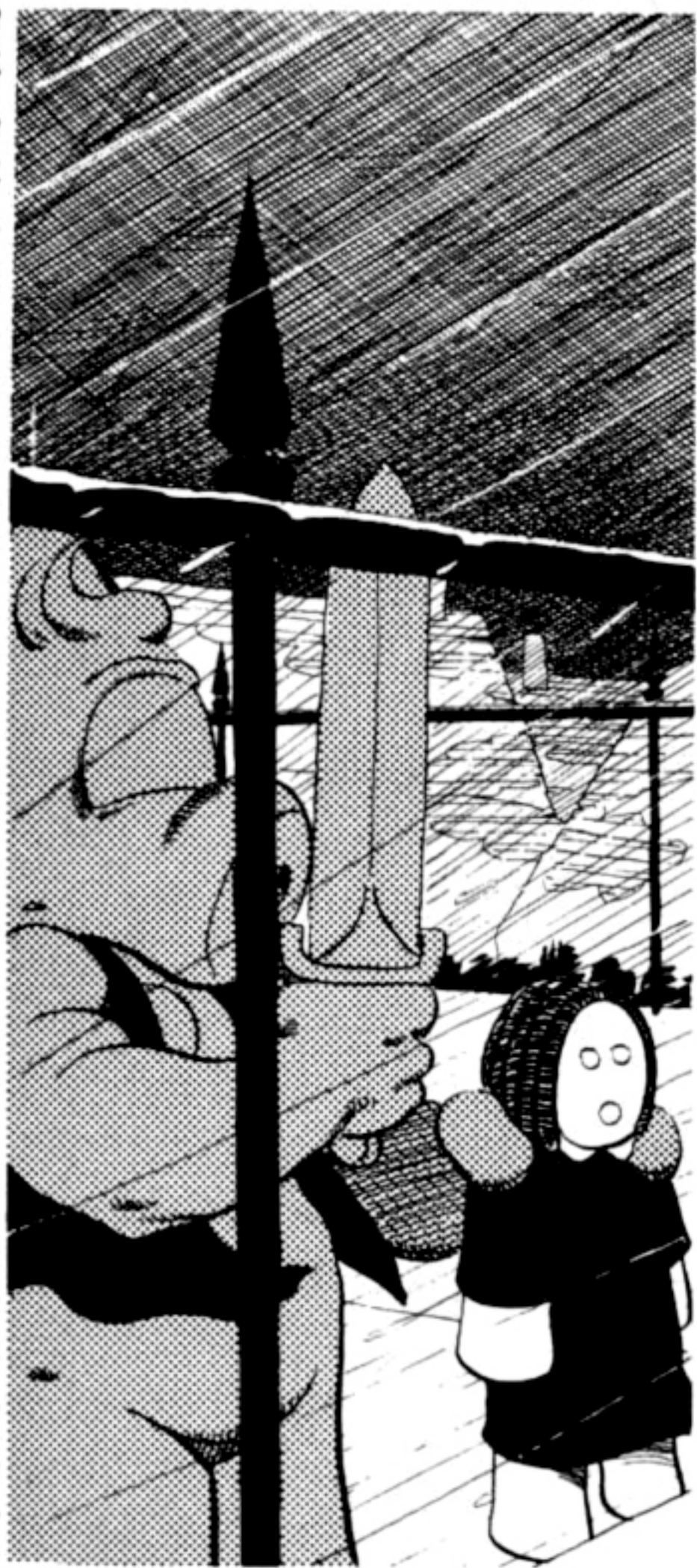


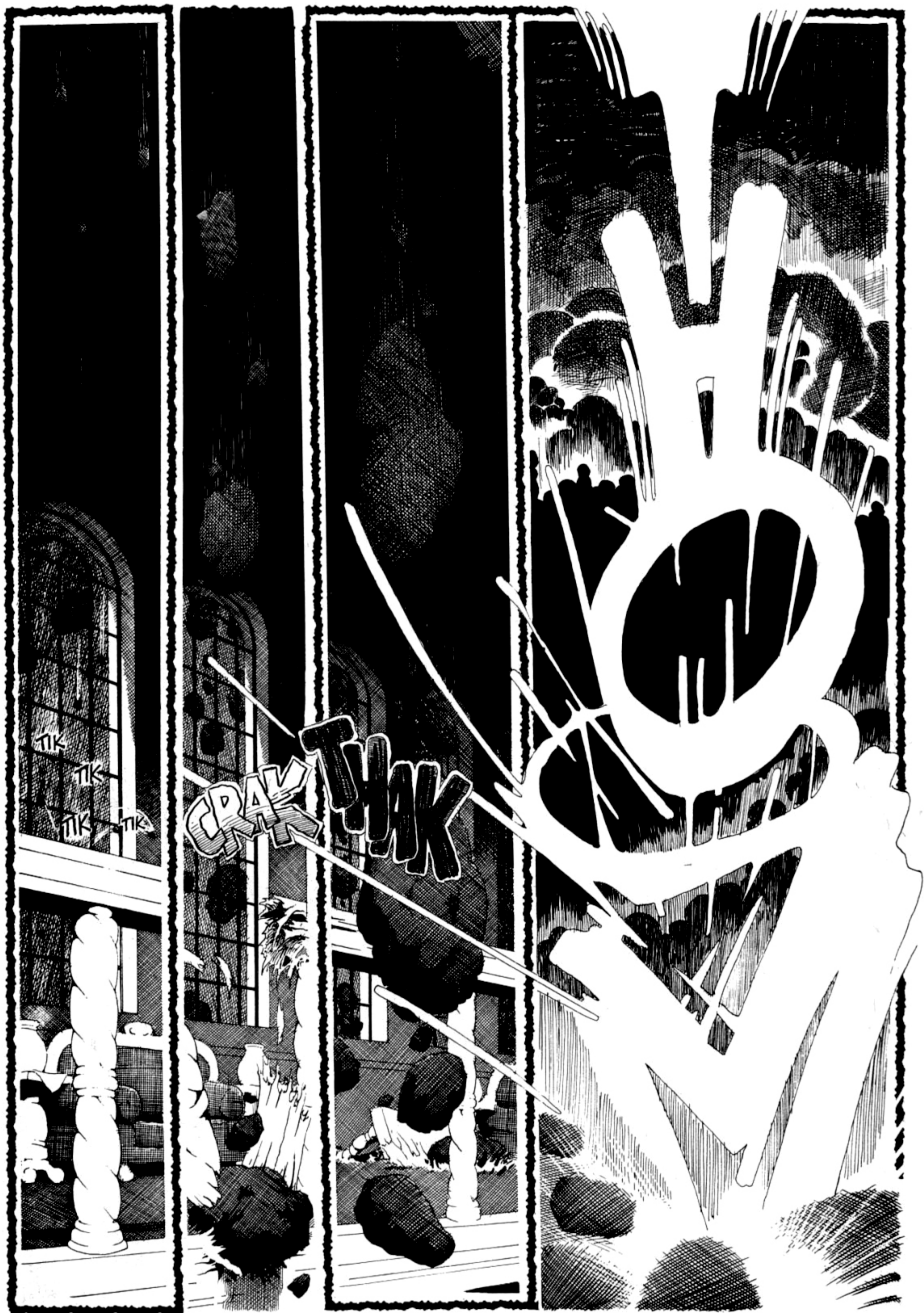
The Matriarchists are heedless of the fact that the Goddess is a Deity of All Womankind. While She is Mother, She is also Daughter. Though She has her bountiful aspect, She is also Virgin. She is both Seductress and Celibate. The Multiverse itself has issued forth from Her Womb; and yet She is untouched; inviolate. The Matriarchists invite disaster, courting, as they do, a single aspect of Her being. The Goddess is Mystery in All Things. If Cirin persists, single-mindedly, in pursuing a False Ascension, the fate which awaits her is the same fate that has befallen all who have stood before the Gate of Heaven.

**Astoria
Kevillist Origins**









... please stand by for your orders from Cirin. There is no need for panic in Cirin.

That isn't *Clair*'s voice. Please identify. Please identify. What is *Clair*'s status. Is there anyone at the Regency who can help with this? Repeat

**Secure the
Regency and
adjoining grounds
Internment of
all Legislative
personnel**

**We are not
preparing to abandon**

The People's Kevillist Army of Greater Iest is in control of the Upper City. Cirin has been executed by her followers having been found guilty of high crimes against the Goddess. Hail, **Gods!** **And the Great Astoria** is the best wing of the Regency has been destroyed. Cirin is in the east wing and will address the people of Iest momentarily.

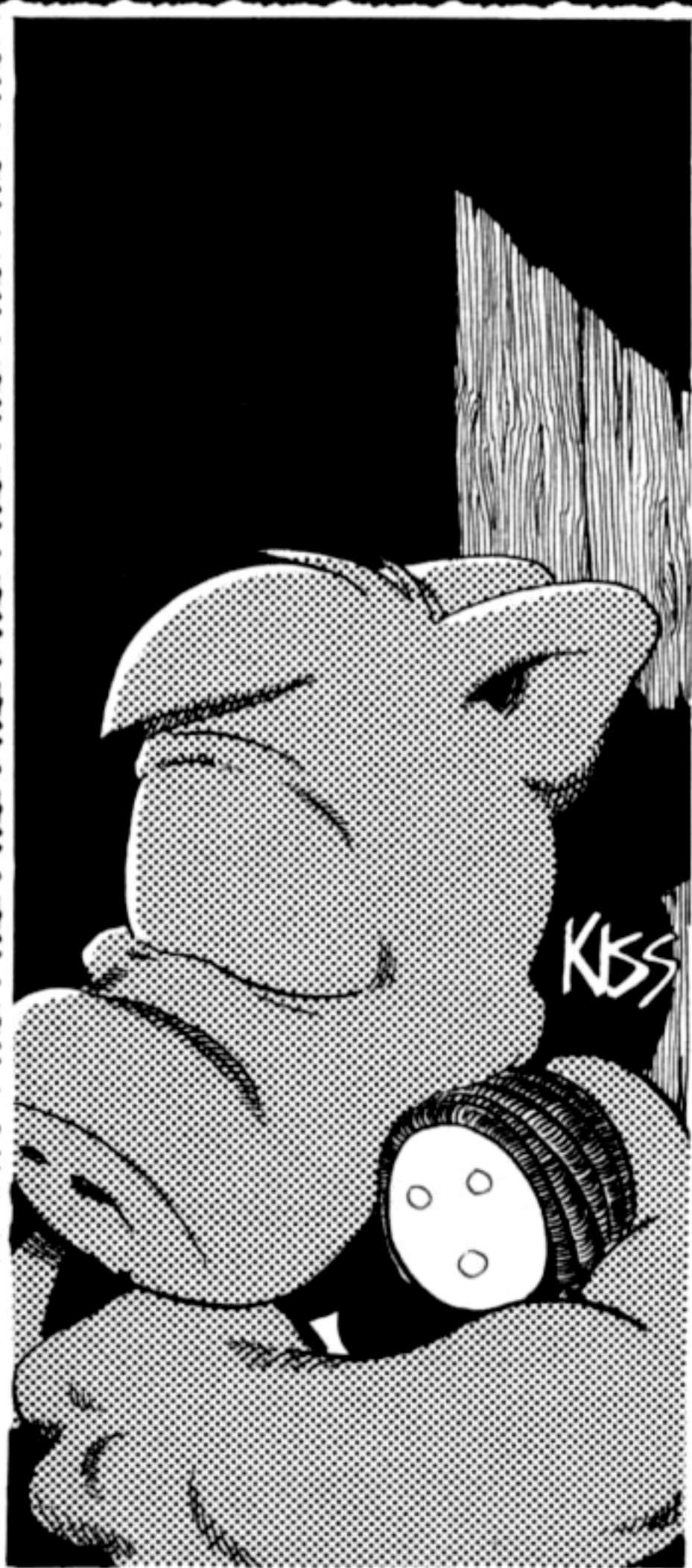
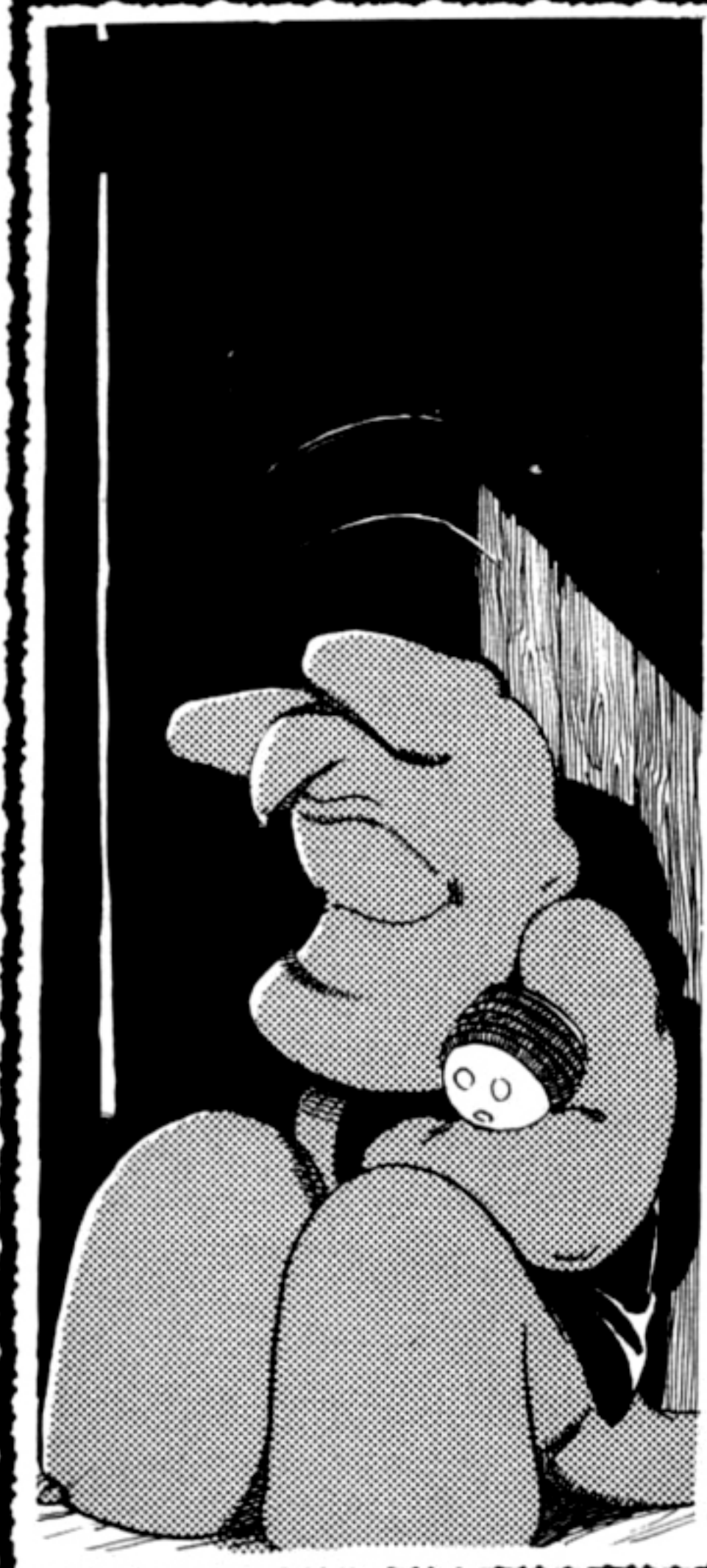
babies are dying. The babies are dying because of the false mother. Open yourself to the real crisis. The babies are dying.

*This Negro not
Carruth, Vogel Greer,
slightly injured.*

Something to tell.

Please make
note of all traitor
activity has been
authorized. Repas
in Smith's order all
others are to be
discarded
The Agency is
convinced that the
above is correct and of

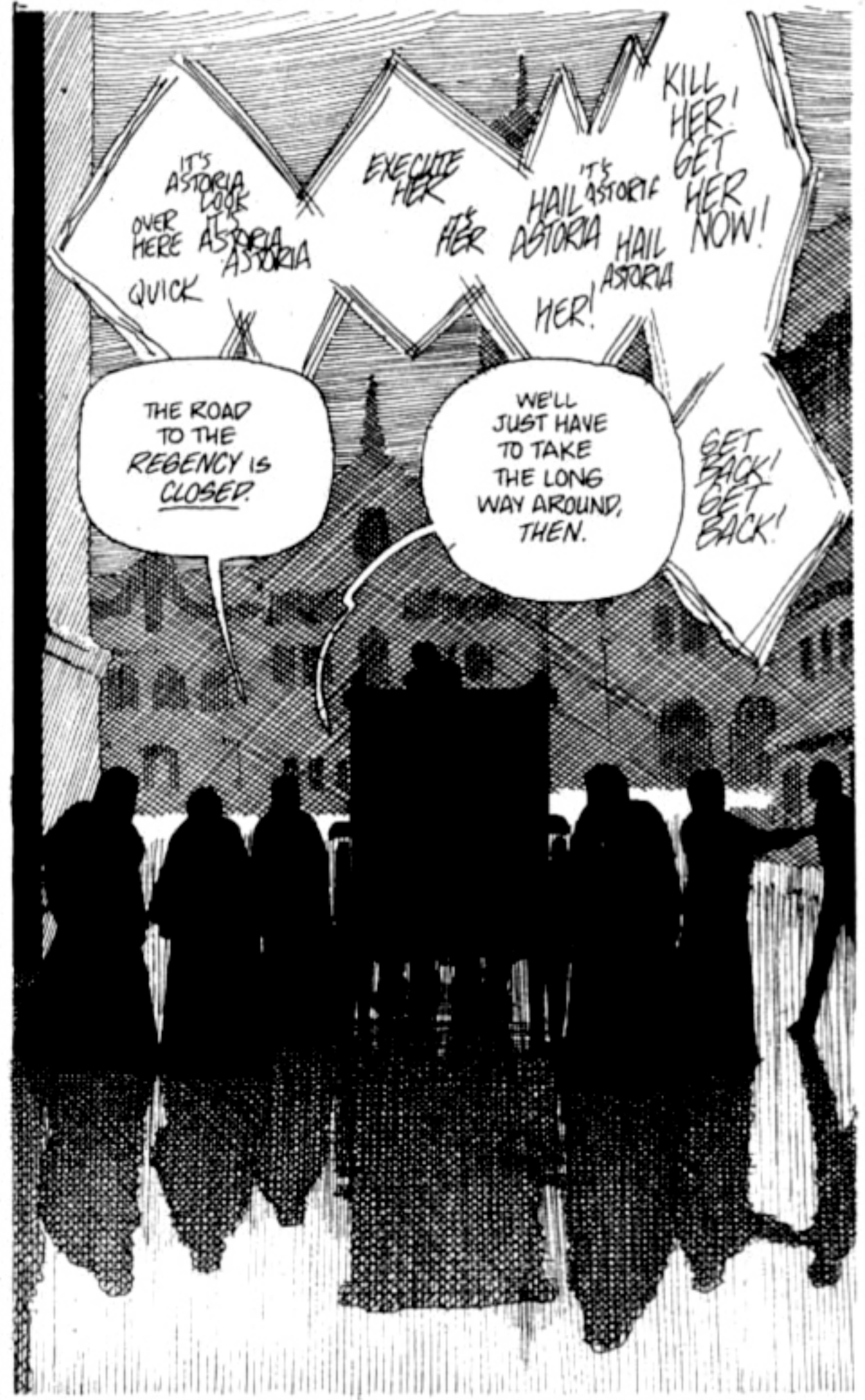
US. We are all barrin.
Our wombs are
poisoned by false
belief. We are
undone by a my
undone by a my
an antidote to
Ernest Hemingway
in the world of
falsehood. The
has been glorified
by General
the Good in
Livingston
Clinton's
Clinton's



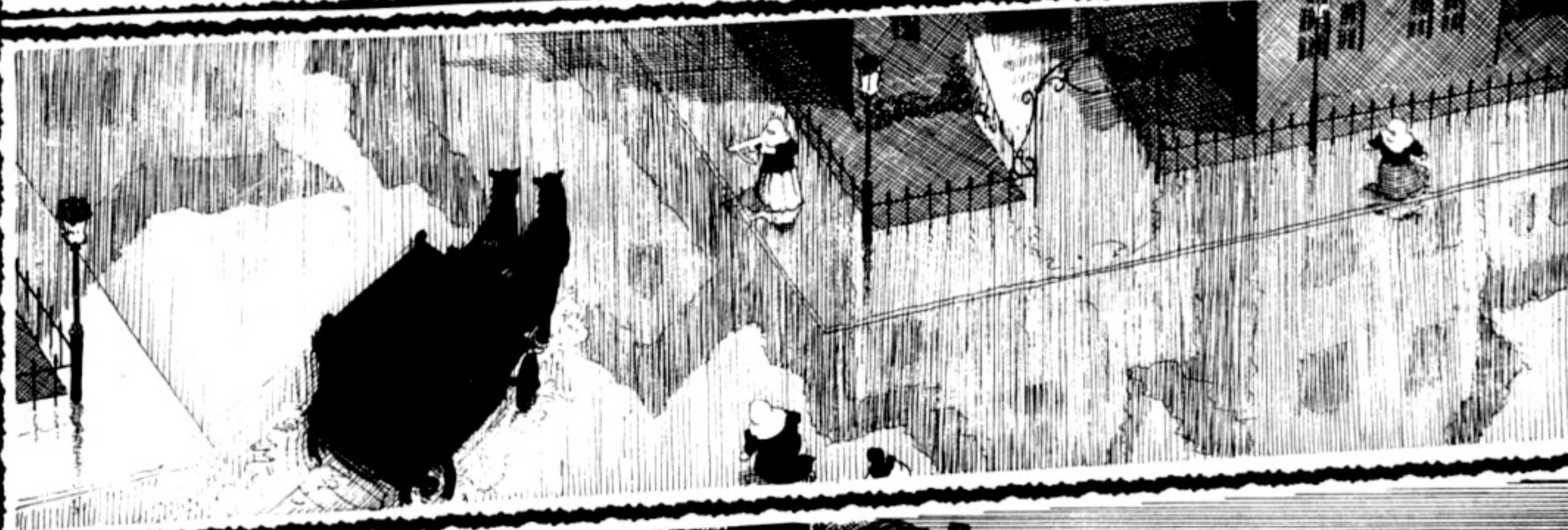
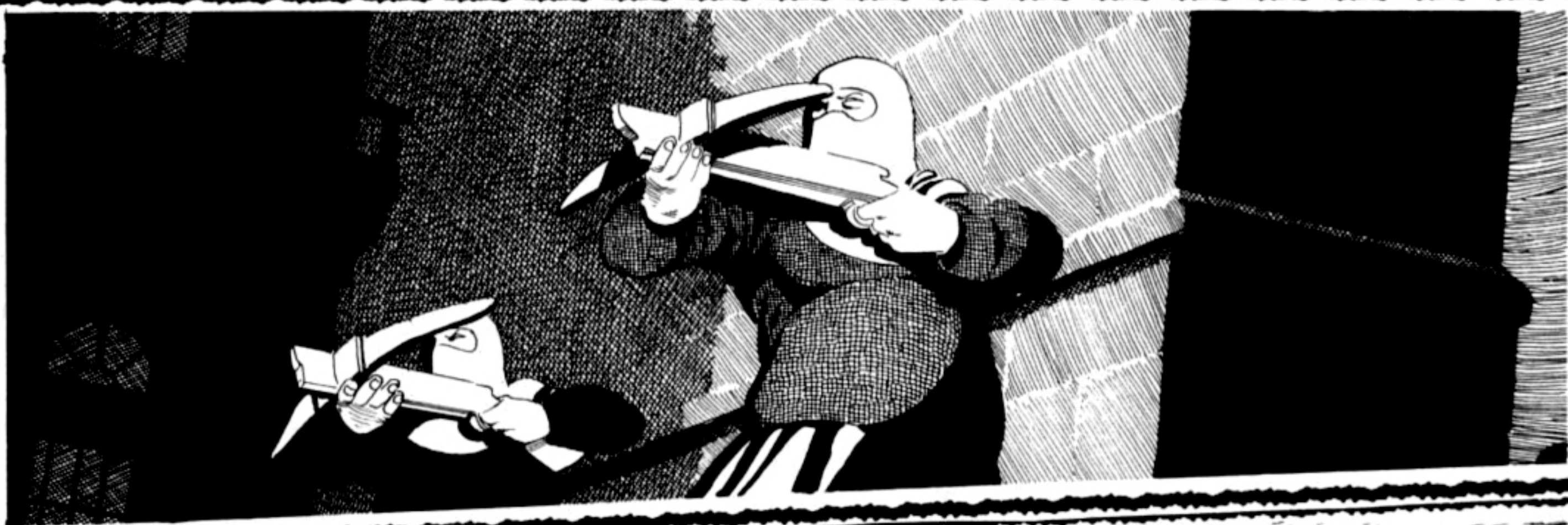


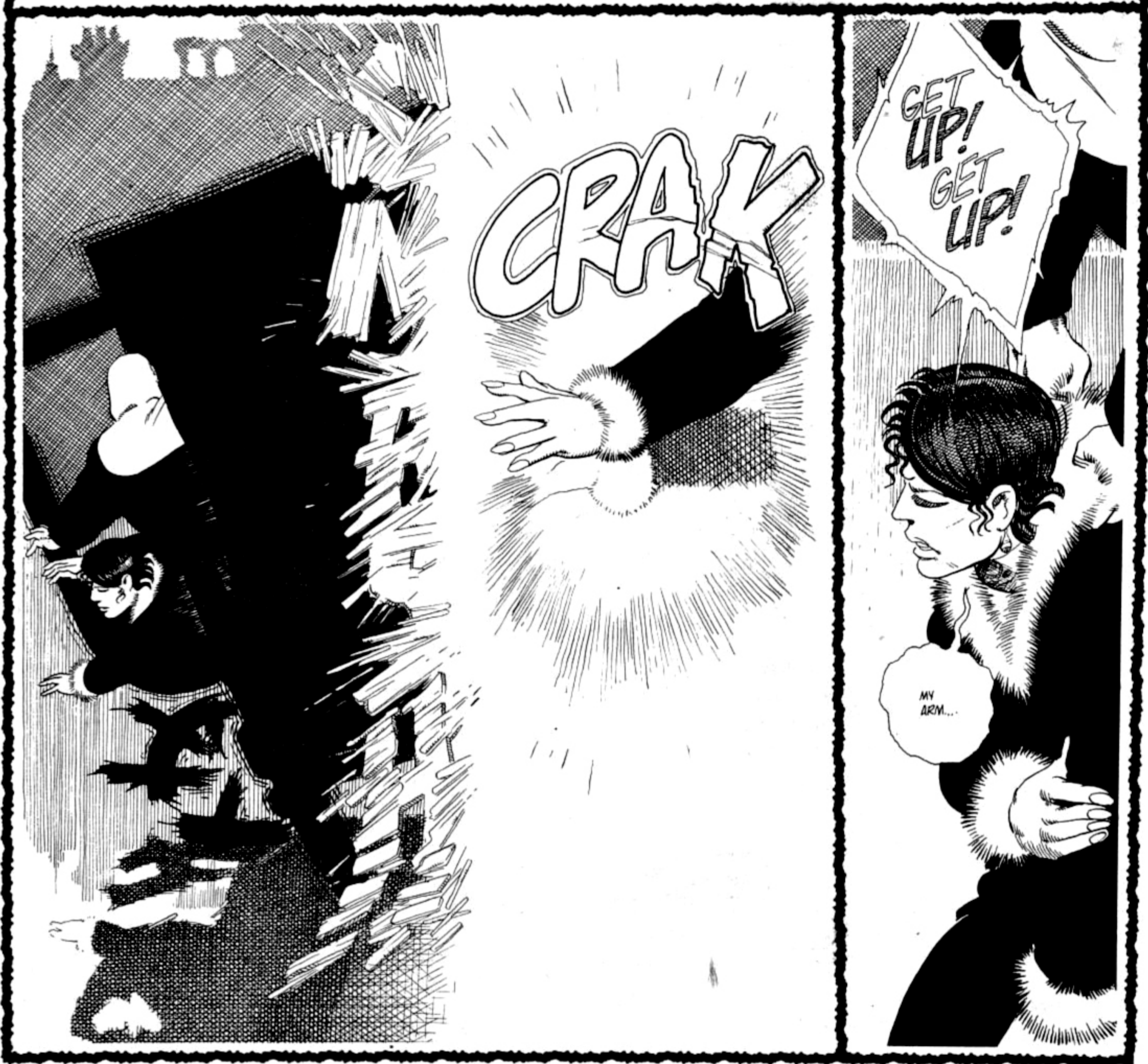
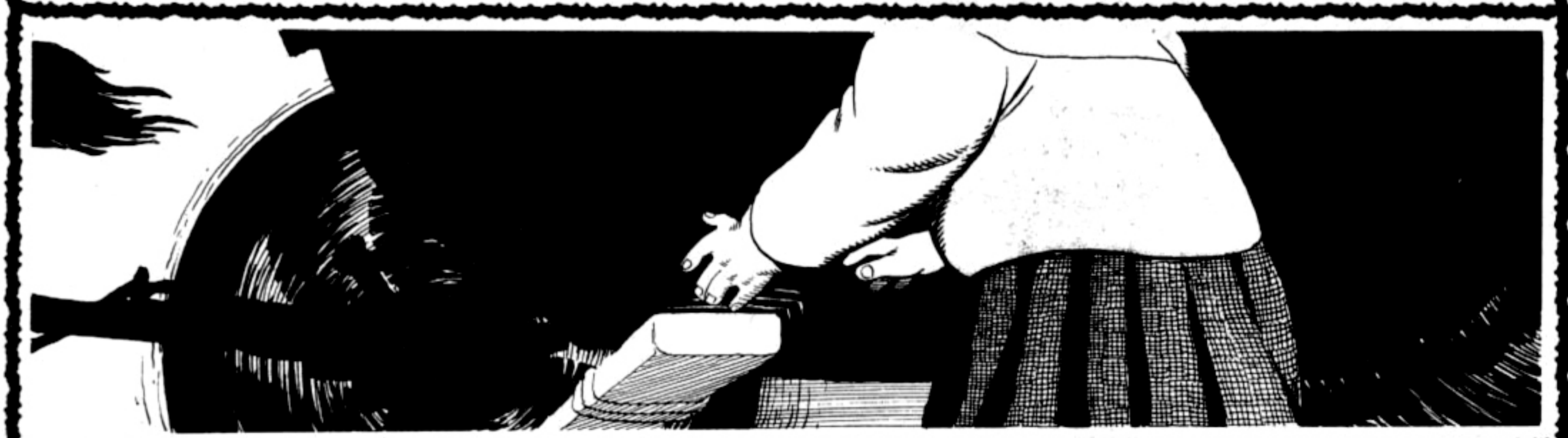
I know things
that have been
forgot.

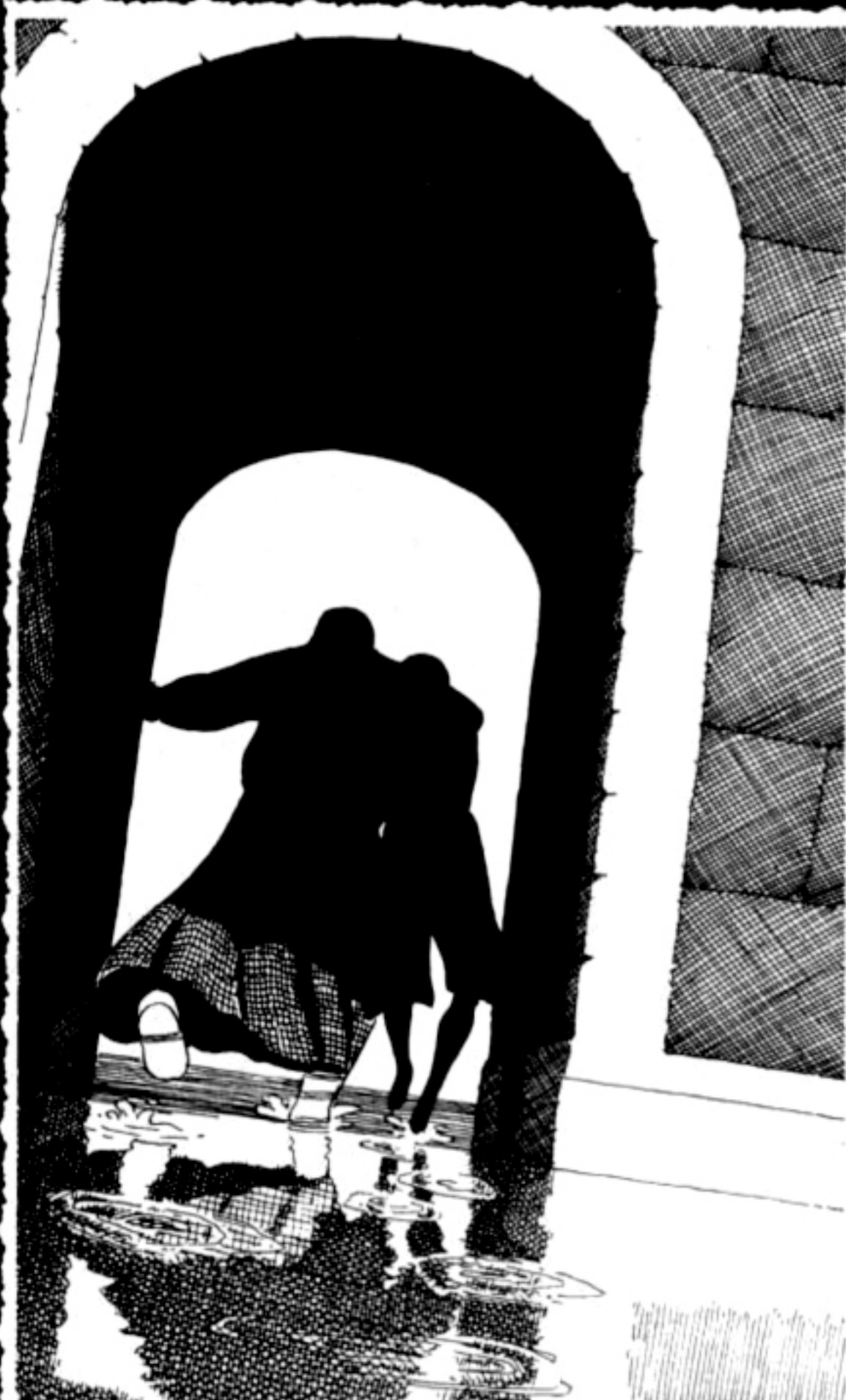
I know things
that will never be
forgot.

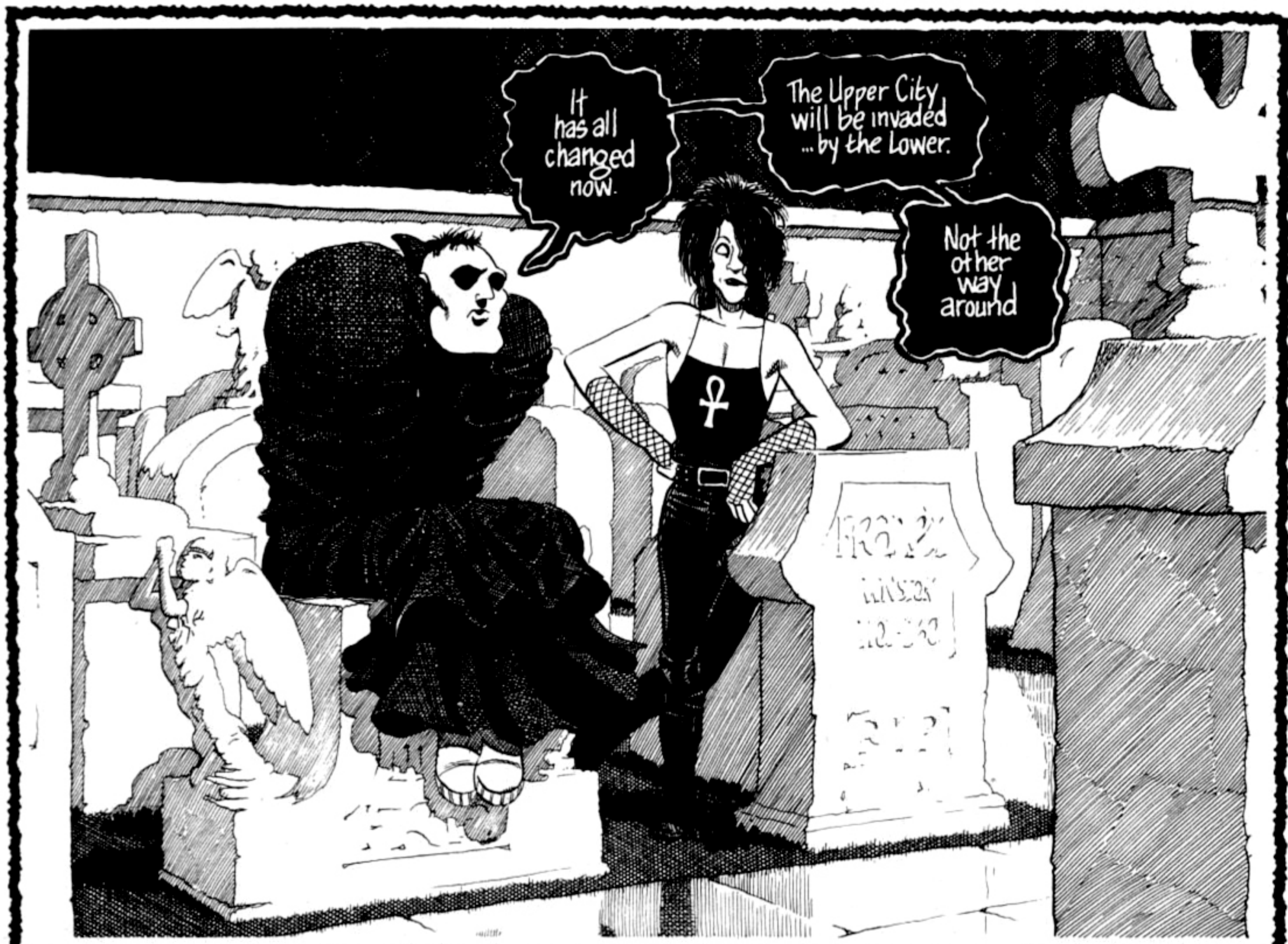














I'M THE **LAST**
RULER OF
A DYIN'
RACE!

AH DON'T
HAVE
ANY
FAMILY!



Nonsense,
my
sister



Think
back.



Remember.



We have
many
names

in
many
realities

We
are

"The
Clueless"



When the
Multiverse
was born

We were
mere
infants.



Little
\$WOONY

Little
\$NCHY

Little
\$LEAZY

Little
\$ULKY

Little
\$PACEY

Little
...

WHOA...
AH SAY
WHOA
AGIN,
SON...

AH DON'T
LIKE T'RAIN
ON ANYBODY'S
HALLUCINATIONS

(DELUSIONS
THAT IS)...

BUT YOU
MUST'VE
NOTICED THAT
WE-ALL ARE
THE ONLY
ONES HERE!
WE'RE A
DUET
SON...

TWO PART HARMONY!
Y'SEE WHUT AHM SAYIN' 2
WHERE...ah say... WHERE'S
THE BOYS IN THE BAND?
WHERE'S THE REST
OF THE SWOON COUNTRY
FAMILY SINGERS?


(CHORUS
THAT IS)





The Matriarchists are at great pains to eliminate the true histories of female dominated societies. Most particularly they disavow any awareness of the brief period in the history of Iest's Upper City when the singular philosophies of the T'capmin writer Kevil took hold. To me, this was the only period of enlightenment in the sordid history of Cirinism when a natural division of responsibility and interests was put in place; Mothers in charge of all issues governing the family and child care and Daughters in charge of all issues not concerned with family and child care. The evolution from one group to the other was natural and well-suited to the needs of society as a whole. Upon giving birth, a woman's tasks changed from those extroverted concerns to a mother's more naturally introverted concerns. The fact that the matriarchy, as constituted in Upper Felda, has been forced to become totalitarian and dictatorial is the surest sign that it is completely out of synch with the natural rhythms of human existence.

Astoria
Kevillist Origins



There have been various aberrant forms of the pure Matriarchy in our long history; experiments where the Daughter rules the Mother. Without exception, these experiments have been disastrous. To limit a Mother's influence to family and child care alone is to ignore the fact that family and child care are irrevocably connected to all aspects of society. A foreign policy which is not founded on the family is misguided adventurism. An economic policy which is not founded on the family is unenlightened avarice. And so on.

**Cirin
The New Matriarchy**

See, I was trying to find *her* and *she* was trying *not* to let me find her and then I got scared. I had this really strong feeling that something really really *bad* was going to happen. I kept thinking, "Cerebus is going to kill me — why is Cerebus going to kill me?"

But . . .

And then the mountain fell over and suddenly she was right there! Right there in front of me!

The fake Regency Elf.

No, dopey pants; the *real* one. I'm the *fake*!

But . . .

See, she was the legend; the one everyone had known about for years and years and years. But she doesn't look like me a *bit*. She has dark wavy hair and big slanted eyes and tall pointy ears and she looks like a porcelain *doll*!

But . . .

See, *she* couldn't exist outside of the Ambassador Suite. That's how I knew she was the real one. I could go outside and play wickets or visit the kitchen or go to the lobby but when the Ambassador Suite got smunched she just went away poof!

Uh . . . so where did you come from?

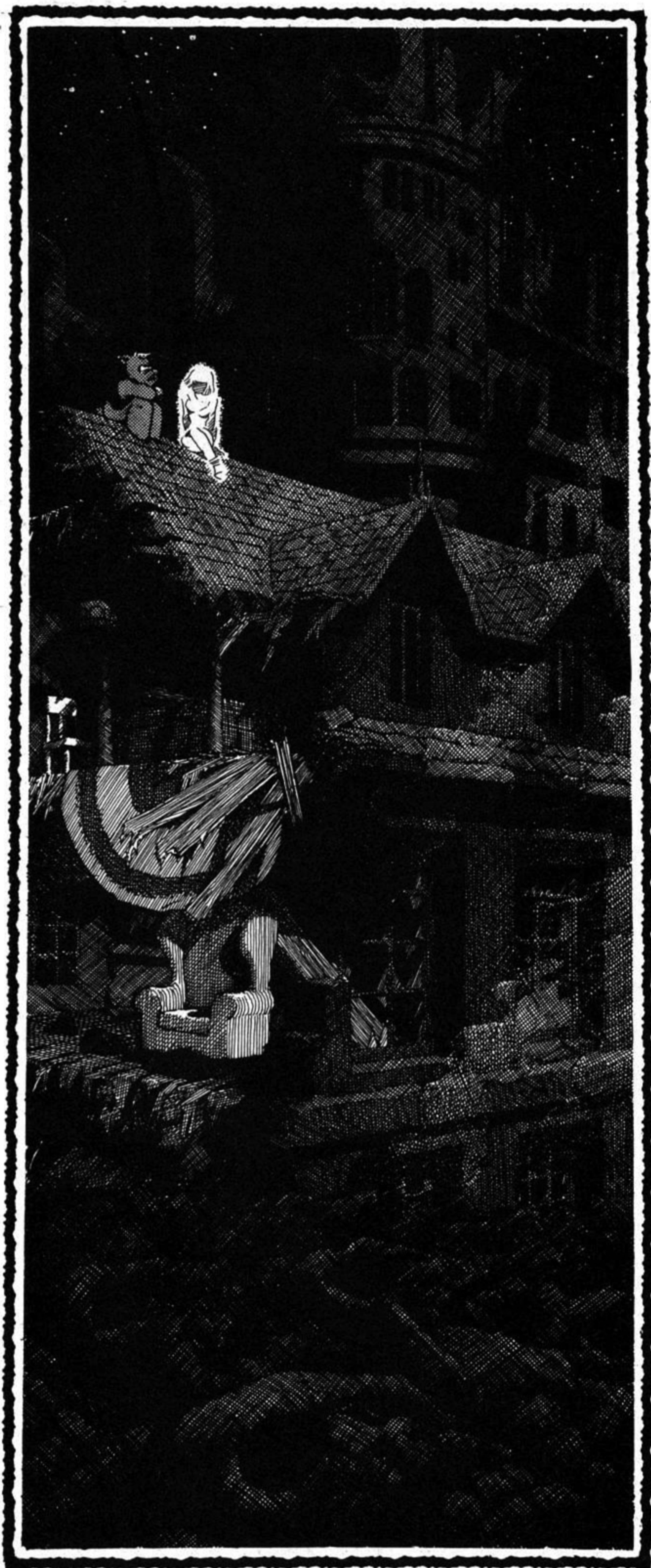
I came from *you*, silly-silly, I already *told* you that!

No you didn't.

Yes I did.
Oh, no. Wait.
That's right.
I didn't.

Well, I did! I came from you.





See, you were *in* the Ambassador Suite the first time you went to the Suinteus Po Place and you were zooming and zipping and swooping and veering and zigging and zagging and swooshing and swishing and . . .

Cerebus gets the idea.

So with all that zooming and zipping and . . . us . . . and that stuff and the REAL Regency Elf being right there, see, that made me. See?

Huh.

HEY! I JUST REALIZED!

Realized what?

I'm your DAUGHTER!

WHAT!?

I'm your DAUGHTER!

THAT'S THE CRAZIEST THING CEREBUS EVER HEARD!

It's NOT crazy.

I'm your DAUGHTER! Your DREAM DAUGHTER! I look like the girl you lived next door to when you were growing up and I look like Jaka and I look like Katrina and I look like Doris and . . .

YOU ARE NOT CEREBUS' DAUGHTER!

Yes I am! Yes I am!

YOU ARE NOT!

Am too! Am too! And I can prove it!

Yeah? How?

Make love
to me!

**ELF! WHAT
A THING
TO SAY!**

See? See?

You wanted
to make
love to the
girl next
door!

**Yes,
but . . .**

And you
wanted to
make love
to Katrina!

**Yes,
but . . .**

And you
DID make
love to
Jaka!

**Yes,
but . . .**

C'mon,
what are
you waiting
for?

Look, I'll
take off
my dress.

**ELF!
DON'T
YOU
DARE!
STOP IT!
STOP
THAT
NOW!
STOP THIS
FOOLISH-
NESS
RIGHT
NOW
YOUNG
LADY OR
CEREBUS
WILL . . .
WILL . . .**





HA!

I'm yo-ur
daugh-ter!

I'm yo-ur
daugh-ter!

This is a
dream.

Of course.

This is too
weird. It's a
dream.

Uh uh.

Sure. It's a
dream and
Cerebus
is going
to wake
up and
Cerebus
will go and
get himself
a nice
drink.

Uh uh.

It's LIKE a
dream, but
it's different.
You're really
here.

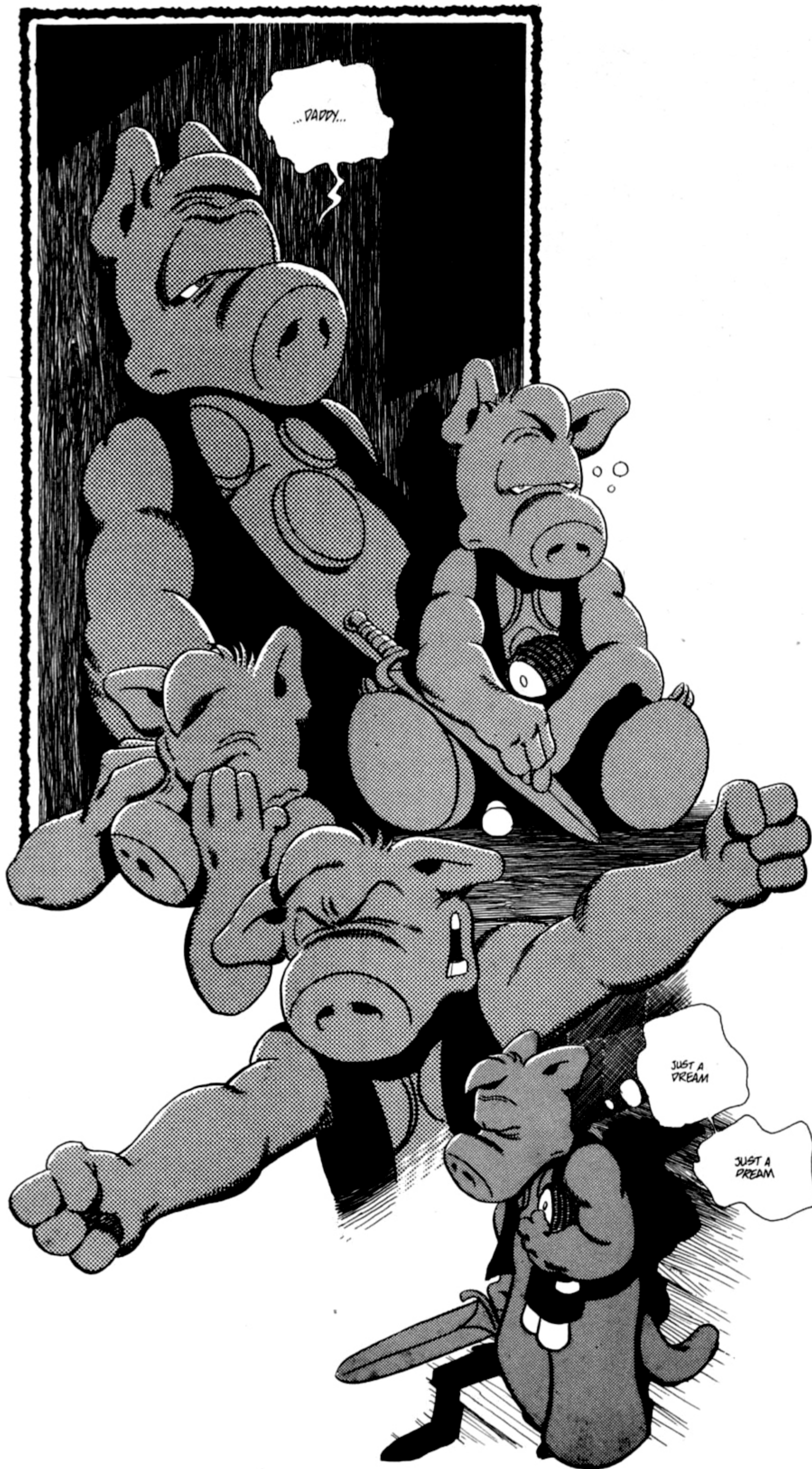
No no.
Cerebus
is just
dreaming
and when
Cerebus
wakes up,
Cerebus
will get
himself a
nice drink
and ...

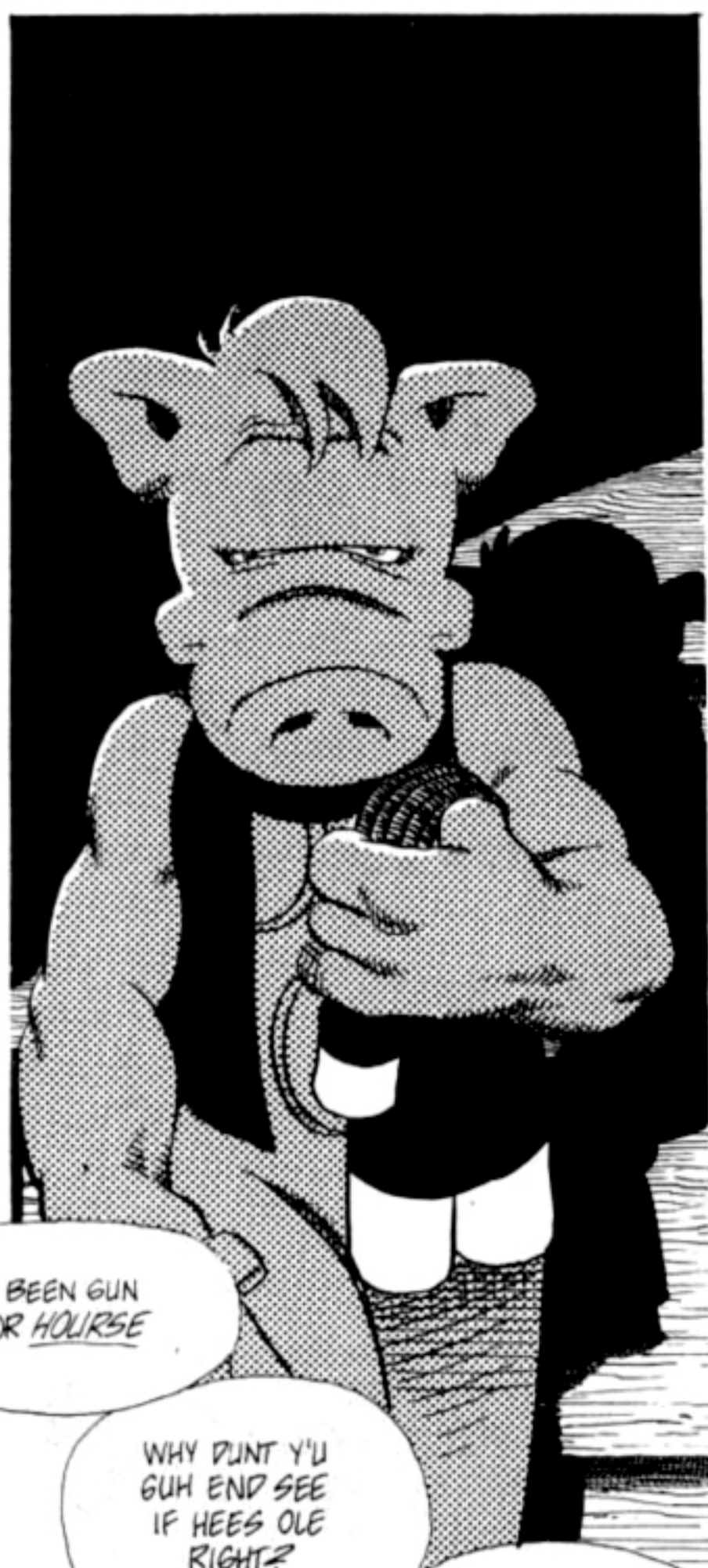
What do
you want
to drink,
Daddy?

An ale ...
a nice tall
... **DON'T
DO THAT!**

Don't do
what?

**DON'T
CALL
CEREBUS**
...





HEES BEEN GUN
FOOR HOURSE

WHY DUNT Y'U
GUH END SEE
IF HEES OUE
RIGHT?

ME? WHY ME?
YER TH' DANG
MANAGER!!

I KNUH-- BUT I EM
SOOPOSE TO WATCH
THE BAR...

EF THE
OWNAIR COOMS
EEN END FINDS
ME GUN
SKKKKK
HE KEEL
ME DED
...

AH AIN'T
FINISHED
MUH BEER,
YET!

FOORST Y'U
SAY "I KENT
GUH--I NEET
A BEER"

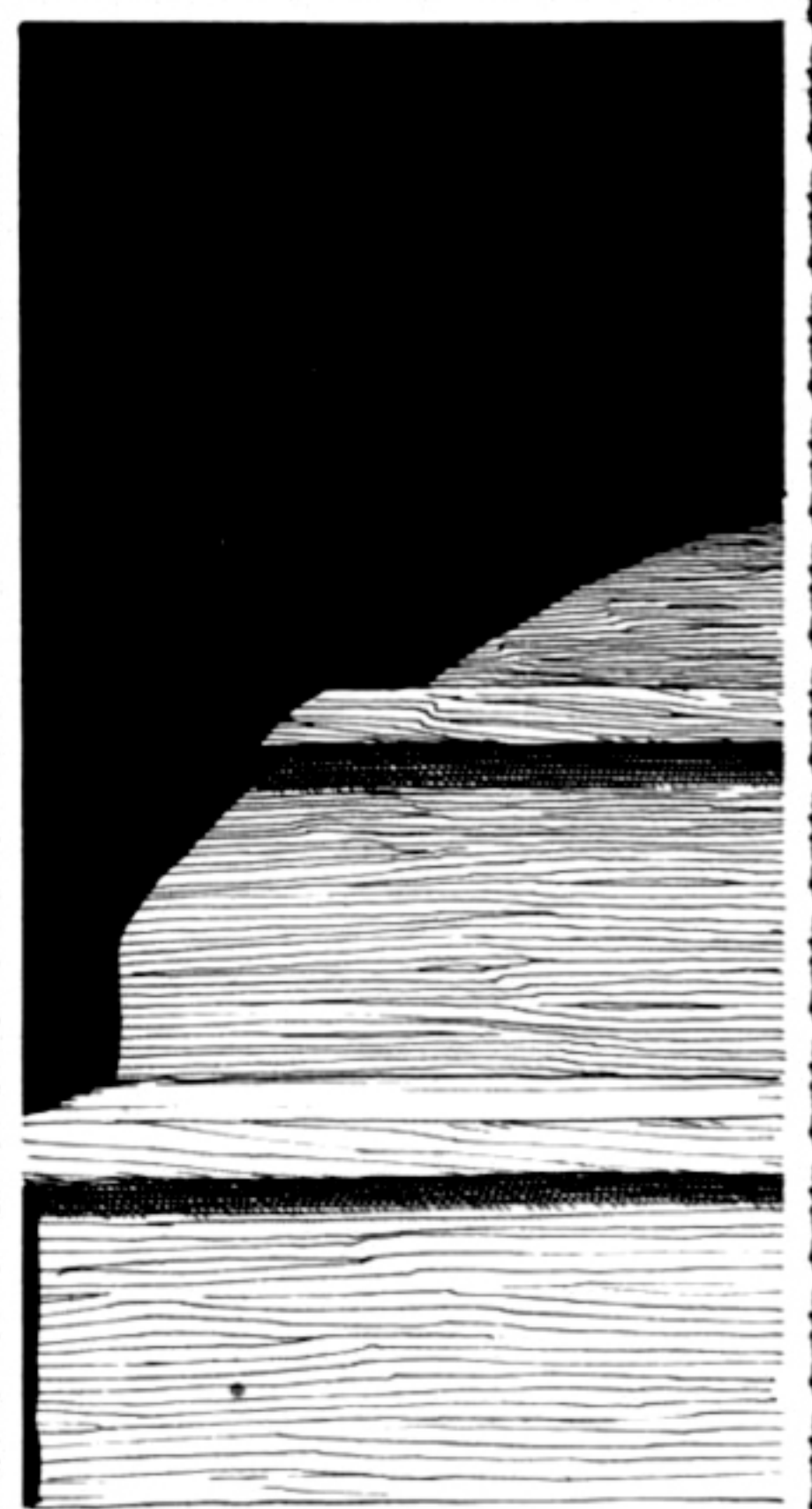
THAIN Y'U
SAY "I KENT
GUH, I NEET
ANLTHAIR
BEER"



WHY DUNT YUH
SENT Y'U BRUTHAIR
UP? WHAIR EES
HE?

HE WENT TUH
FIND OUT WHUT
THET BIG KER-
BANG WUZ
ALL ABOUT--
NOW LEAVE
ME ALONE
TUH FINISH
MUH DANG
BEER IN
PEACE, YUH
SCRAWNY,
NO-ACCOUNT
...

SH! HEER
HE EES!



HALLO! WE WAIR
JOOST TALKEENK
ABOUT Y'UH...

WOOT Y'U
LIKE SUMTHEENG
TUH DREENK,
MUST HULLY?



ALE



AH JEST
FOUND OUT IT
AIN'T NO
RUMOUR!



A WHOMPIN' BIG
HUNK O' TH'
MOUNTAIN A-FELL
ON TH' LIPPER
CITY AT HAGH
NOON T'DAY!!



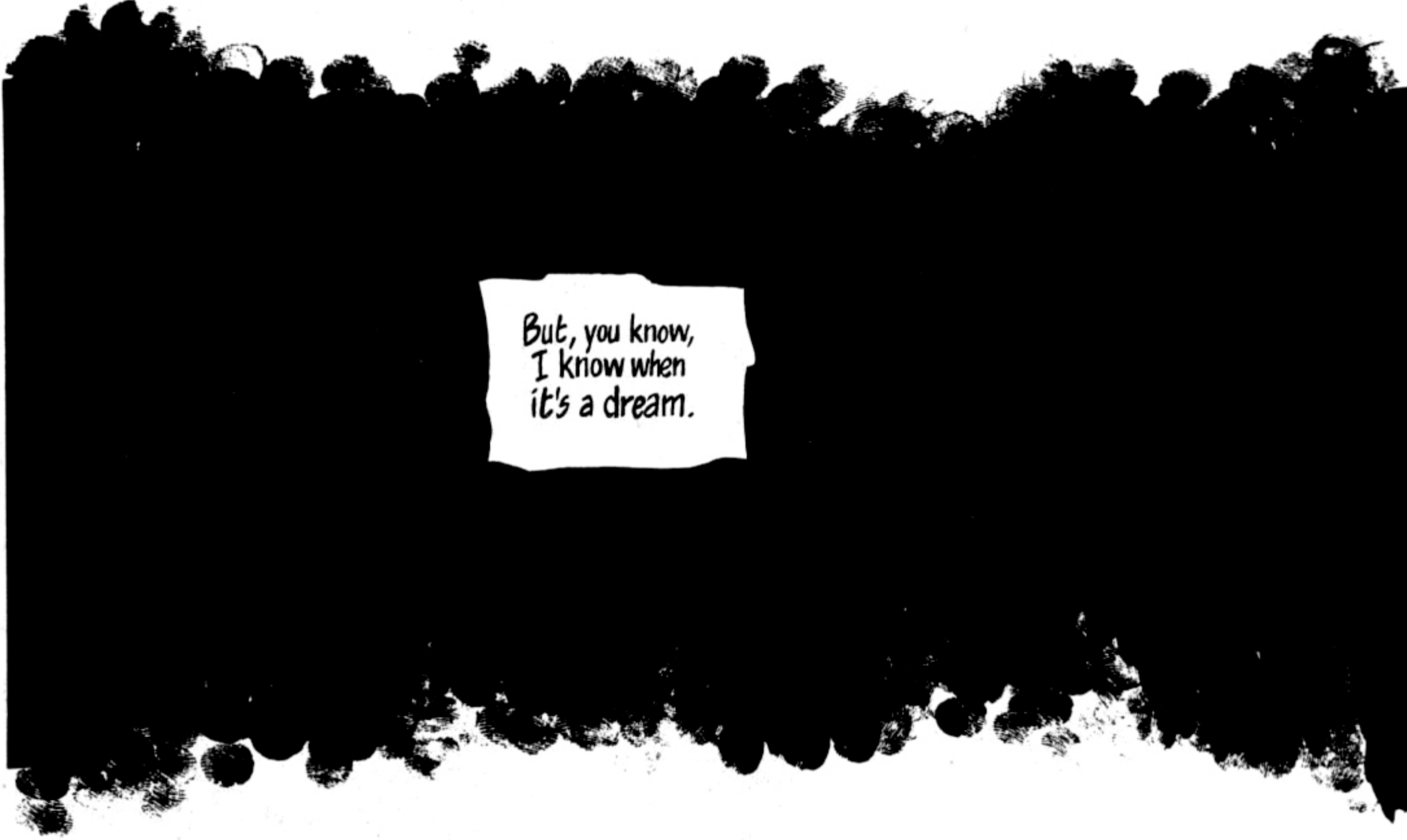
AN' SMASHED
TH' REGENCY
HO-TELL TUH
SMITHEREENIES



...
AND A
SMALL
BUCKET
OF
SCOTCH.

YES, SOR,
MEESTER
CEREBOOS
THE PUP!

RIGHT
AWAY.



But, you know,
I know when
it's a dream.

PRINCESS?



D-DADDY?

DADDY!



OH DADDY--
I'VE MISSED
YOU
SO MUCH!

YOUR MOTHER
IS HERE, TOO,
ASTORIA...

NO!!

SEND
HER
AWAY!

I DON'T
WANT
MUMMY
HERE
...





ARTEMIS!

CHUD

WHAT IN THE
HELL DO YOU
THINK YOU'RE
DOING?!



Well...

I

uh

**ANSWER
ME!**



**COME
BACK
HERE**

YOU...

YOU...

POIT!

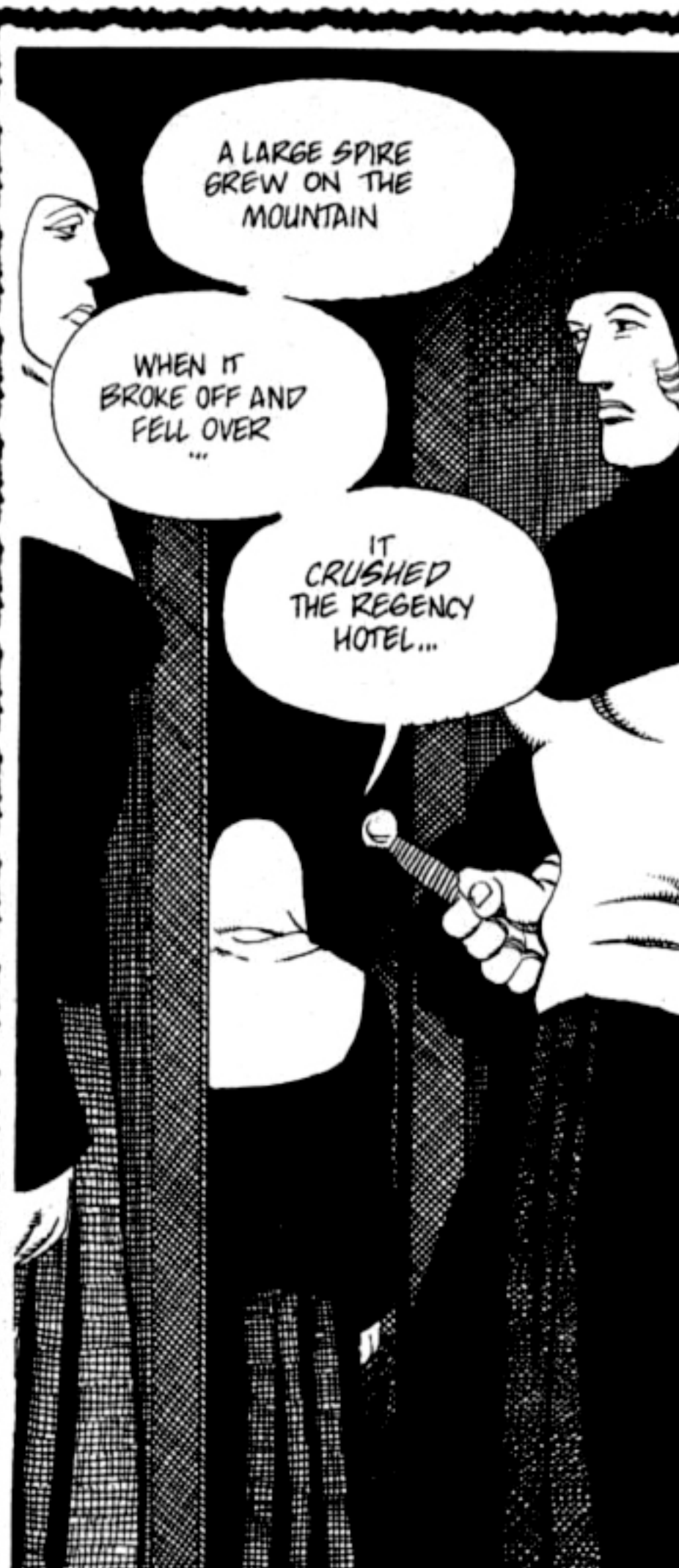






OH
REALLY.

AND WHAT--
THEORETICALLY--
DID SHE DIE
OF.



A LARGE SPIRE
GREW ON THE
MOUNTAIN

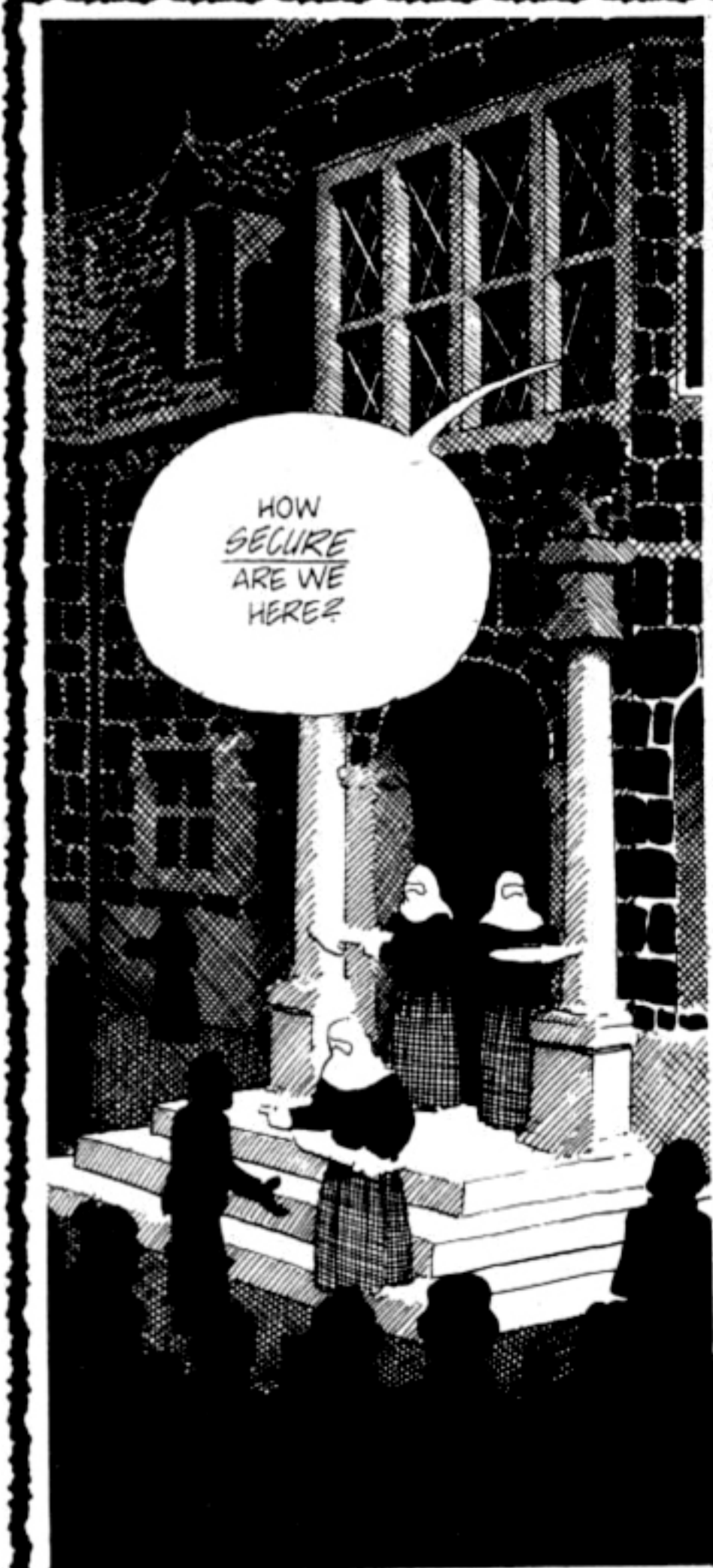
WHEN IT
BROKE OFF AND
FELL OVER
...

IT
CRUSHED
THE REGENCY
HOTEL...



THE
UPPER
CITY...

CURIOUS.



HOW
SECURE
ARE WE
HERE?



WE HAVE HEAVILY-
ARMED GUARDS STATIONED
AT EVERY ENTRANCE...
THE CIRIN LOYALISTS
ARE KEEPING THEIR
DISTANCE...

THERE ARE A
NUMBER OF SUPPORTERS
AND CURIOSITY-SEEKERS
MILLING AROUND THE
GROUNDS...

NOTHING WE
CAN'T HANDLE



TO BE HONEST,
EVERYONE IS JUST
...STUNNED WOULD
BE THE BEST WORD
FOR IT...

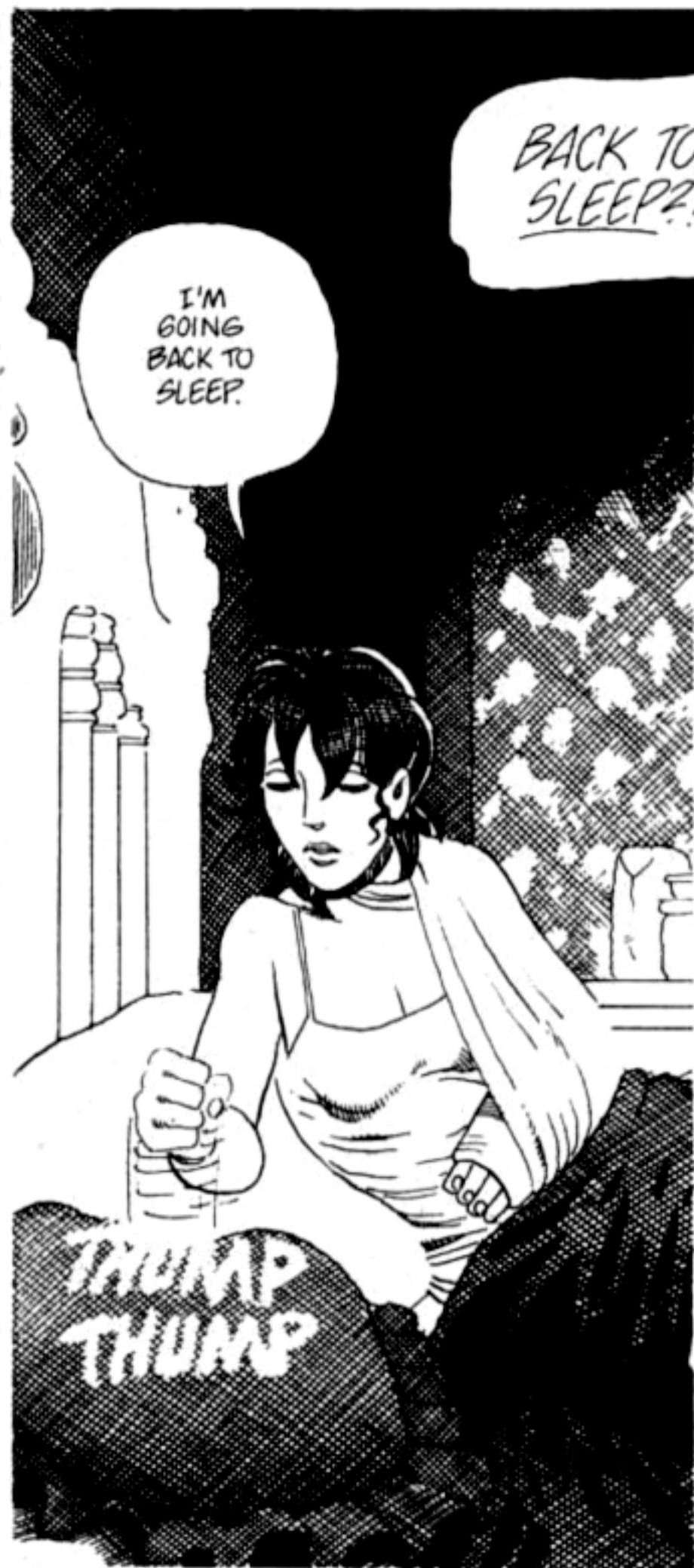
JUST GOING THROUGH
THE MOTIONS... WAITING
TO SEE WHAT HAPPENS
NEXT...

I'LL
BET.



WHAT IS YOUR
PLAN, GREAT
ASTORIA?

PLAN?



I'M
GOING
BACK TO
SLEEP.

THUMP
THUMP

BACK TO
SLEEP?!



BUT!

BUT,
WE NEED
INSTRUCTIONS!



VERY
WELL

WHEN
I WAKE UP
I'D LIKE A
SOFT-BOILED
EGG, A BRAN
MUFFIN, A FEW
SLICES OF AGED
CHEDDAR AND
SOME CINNAMON
TEA...



BUT... YOU
CAN'T MEAN
THAT!

W-WE
MUST
STRIKE!

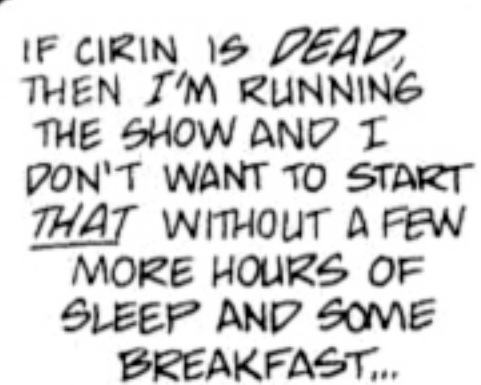
NOW!



HARDLY.



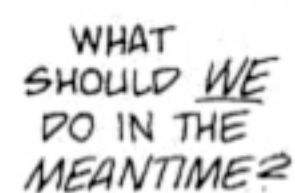
IF CIRIN IS ALIVE,
ALL OF YOU ARE
GOING TO BE DEAD
THE MOMENT SHE
DECIDES TO SEND A
LEGION OR TWO TO
GET ME FOR OUR
LITTLE CHAT...



IF CIRIN IS DEAD,
THEN I'M RUNNING
THE SHOW AND I
DON'T WANT TO START
THAT WITHOUT A FEW
MORE HOURS OF
SLEEP AND SOME
BREAKFAST...



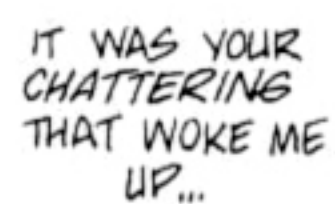
BUT...



WHAT SHOULD WE
DO IN THE
MEANTIME?



MOVE TO THE OTHER
END OF THE HALL
OR TALK IN
WHISPERS.



IT WAS YOUR
CHATTERING
THAT WOKE ME
UP...



I...



I...



YES, GREAT
ASTORIA...

SO THEN, CEREBUS
DOVE BACK INSIDE THE
TOWER WHERE THE BIG
MAN AND WOMAN
APOCALYPSE BEAST
COULDN'T GET HIM

AND THE TOWER WAS
STILL GETTING TALLER
AND TALLER, BUT IT
WAS ALSO GETTING
NARROWER AND
NARROWER,
SEE?

SO THEN CEREBUS
CAN HEAR THE TOWER
STARTING TO MAKE THIS
CRACKING NOISE
AND BEFORE YOU
KNOW IT



Y'KNOW-- AH
HED ME A DREAM
JEST LAK THET
ONCE...

THAR
WUZ THIS
BIG OL'
HAIRY
BLUE
DANG...



IT WASN'T A
DREAM,
YOU MORON!



CEREBUS
ASCENDED
INTO
VANAHEIM!

I THUTT' Y'U SET
Y'U LENTET UN
THE MUUN...

YEAH...
THET'S
RAGHT


THET'S
WHUT
YUH
SED.





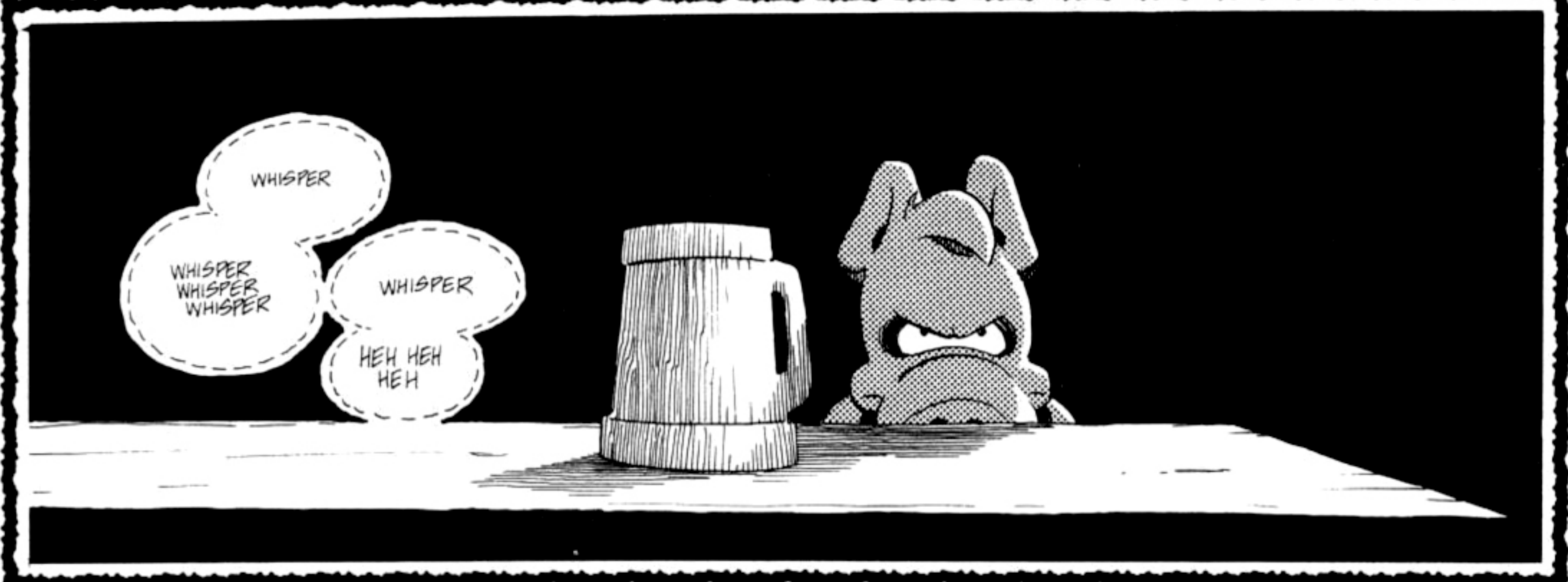
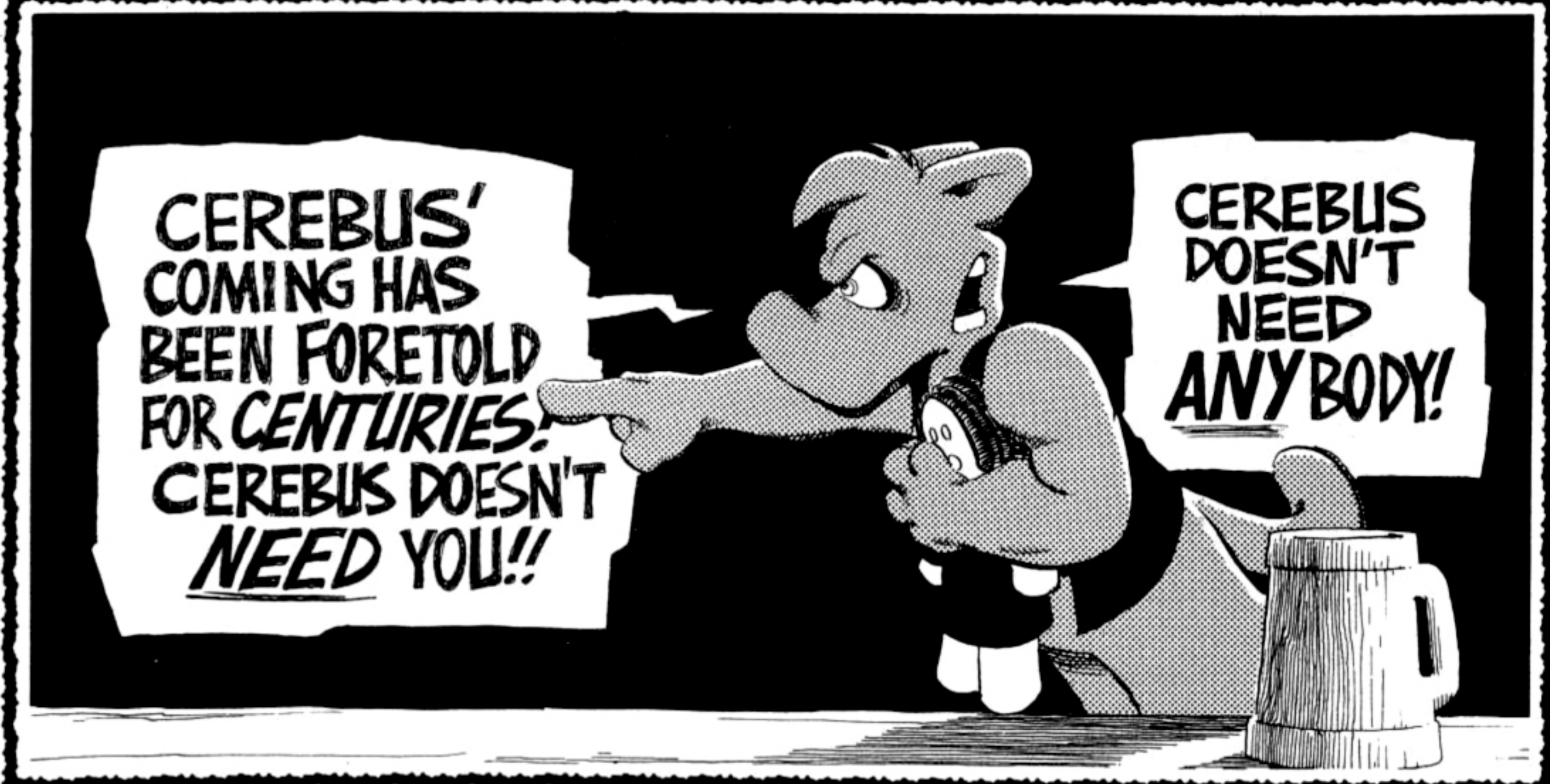
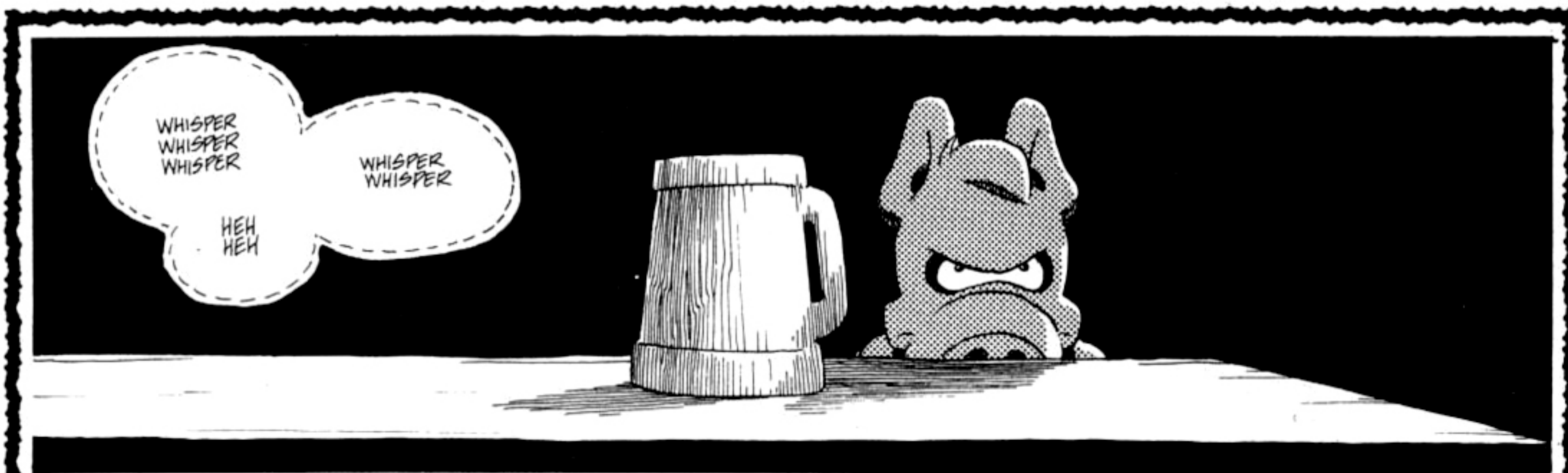
On the subject of dreams, most particularly, the matriarchists reveal themselves to be dictatorial and uncompromising. From a very early age, they train their daughters to regard all of existence as real and tangible; that any transgression awake or asleep is to be regarded as equally suspect and as a punishable offence. Naturally enough, there is no way to control people's dreams, but their vehemence on the subject has caused more than one small child to regard herself as depraved, evil and unworthy through having dreamt herself in a circumstance which does not meet with matriarchal approval. Dreamers, awake and asleep, have been responsible for most, if not all, of the great developments in all areas of human endeavour. Small wonder that, apart from inventing itself, the matriarchy is barren of anything that could (even by the most charitable) be described as an idea; and further that they are always in the forefront of those who seek to oppress, inhibit and eradicate new thought. Until, of course, that new thought proves itself beneficial to their society, whereupon they embrace it whole-heartedly and strike all reference to their original opposition from any written record.

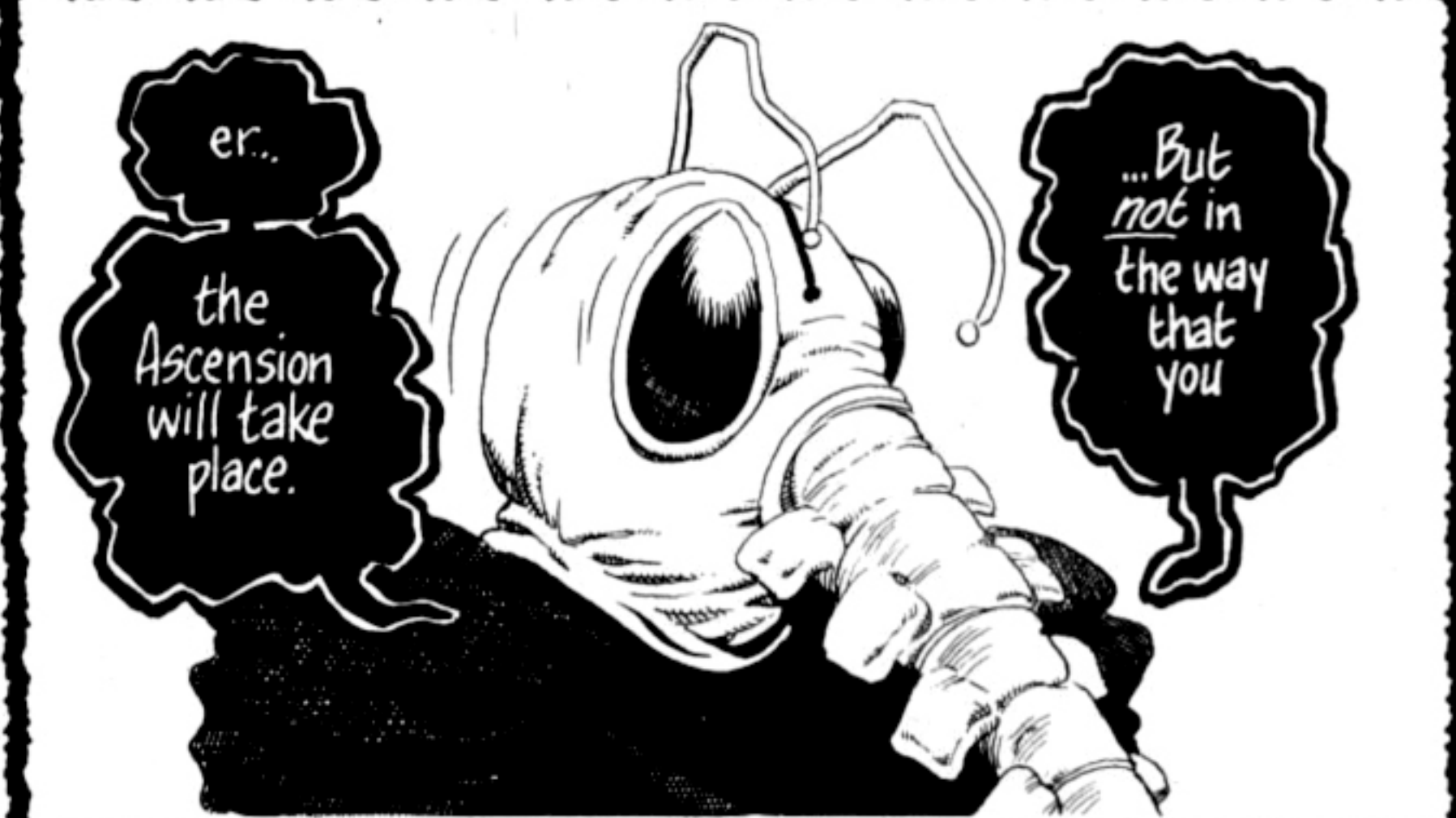
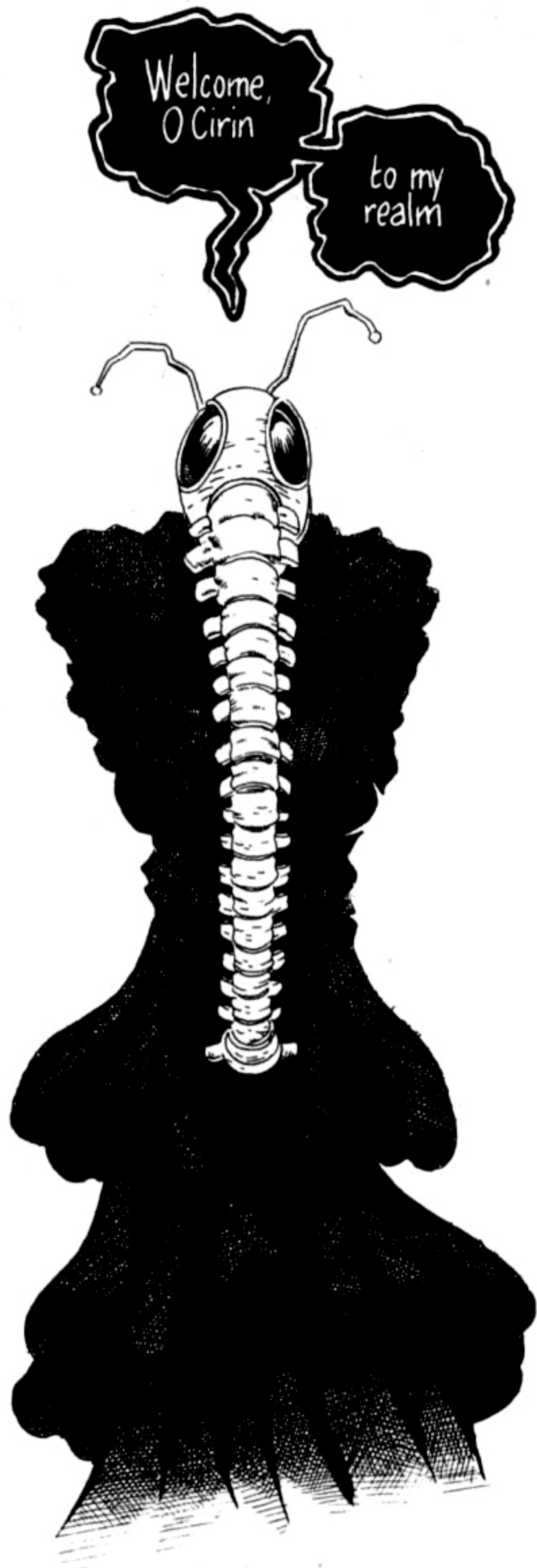
**Astoria
Kevillist Origins**

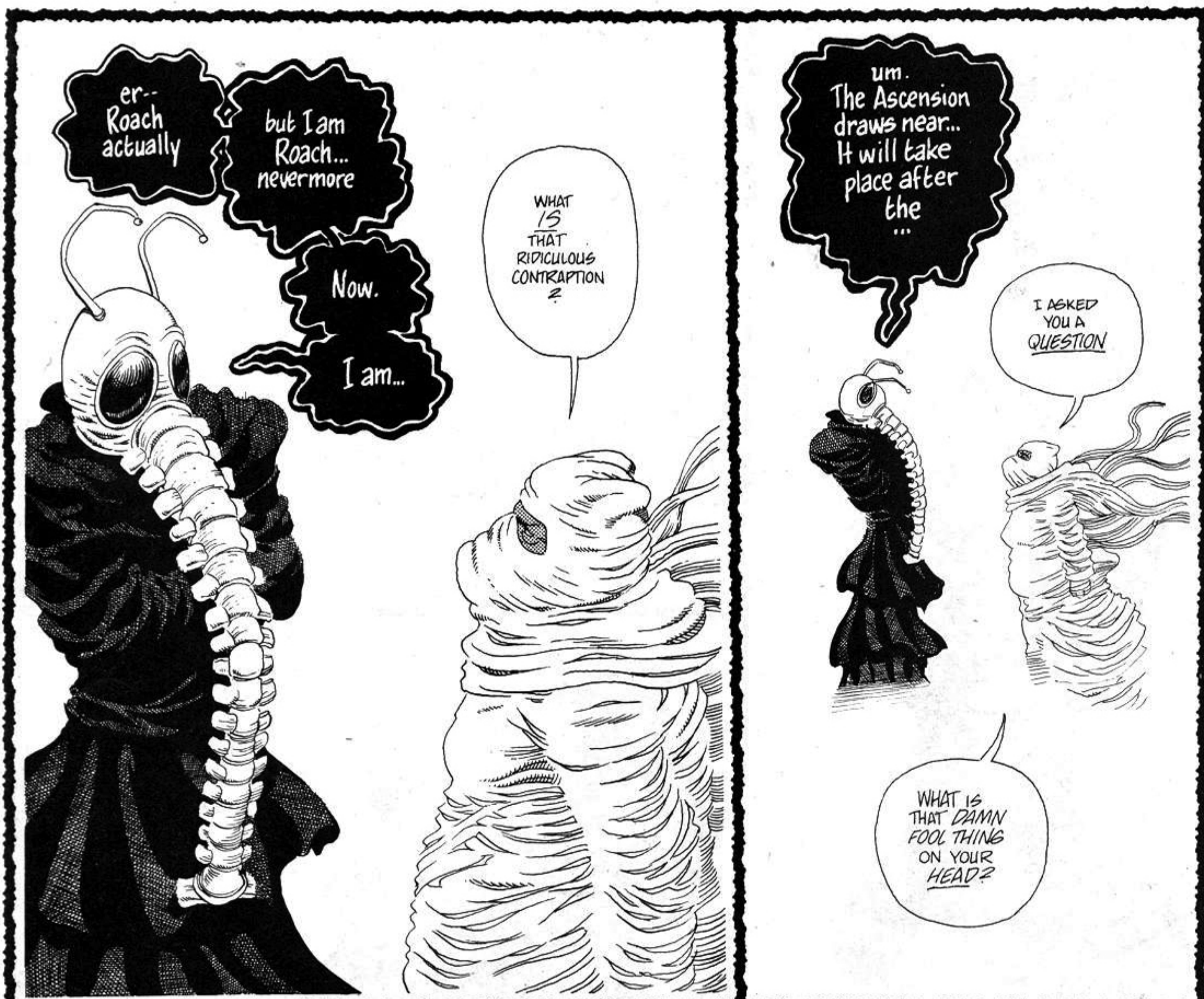


It is most important to have a thorough-going discussion with your daughters each morning on the subject of their dreams. For it is in dreams that depravity and wickedness find their surest hand-hold. The morning discussion should begin as soon as the child is capable of expressing herself so that she can learn as soon and as completely as possible what constitutes a Good Dream and what constitutes a Bad Dream. Great care should be exercised in making the child aware that dreams are inside their own heads and do not originate elsewhere. Once advised that Bad Dreams represent inner poison which must be dealt with and eliminated by the child herself, she will soon embark on a fit and proper course of self-awareness, self-preservation and self-development. If a daughter is made to confront the demon within, she will have little difficulty distinguishing the demon without.

**Cirin
The New Matriarchy**







er--
Roach
actually

but I am
Roach...
nevermore

Now.

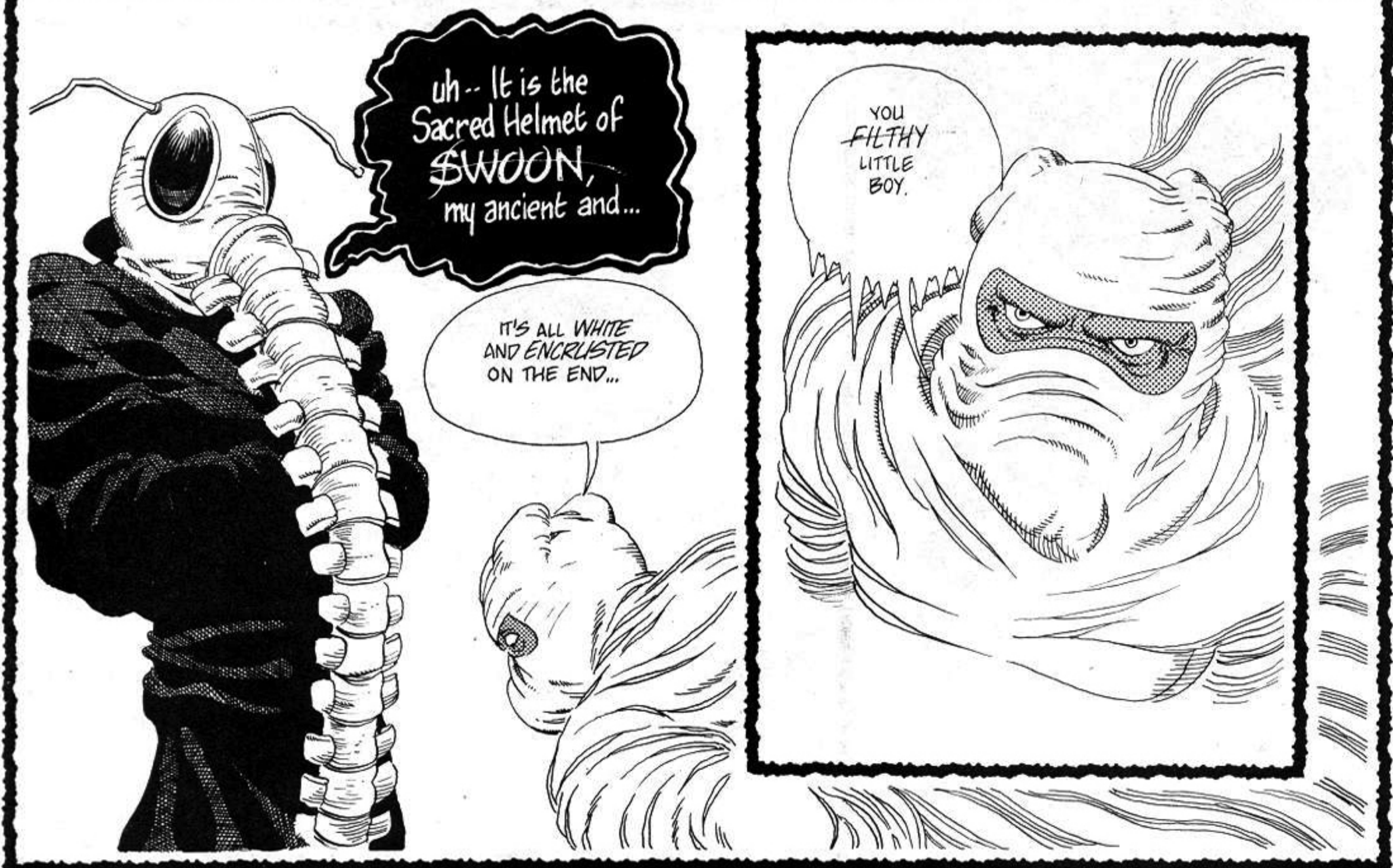
I am...

WHAT
IS
THAT
RIDICULOUS
CONTRAPTION
?

um.
The Ascension
draws near...
It will take
place after
the
...

I ASKED
YOU A
QUESTION

WHAT IS
THAT DAMN
FOOL THING
ON YOUR
HEAD?



uh-- It is the
Sacred Helmet of
\$WOON,
my ancient and...

IT'S ALL WHITE
AND ENCRUSTED
ON THE END...

YOU
FILTHY
LITTLE
BOY.





General Greer:
We have to face facts.
Any time we try to announce anything or reassure the public, it just starts another cacaphony. We have loyal supporters who have secured the grounds of the Papal Residence. Astoria's supporters have secured a small hotel at the edge of the disaster site. Astoria hasn't said . . .

General Dworkin:
I say we just storm the damn hotel and execute her.

General Greer:
You keep saying that, and I keep trying to explain to you that no one is listening to us. They all know when it's Cirin in their heads, but they don't know us from Eve. No one is going to launch an attack with a hundred different voices saying they're us and telling them to do a hundred different things. We've . . .

General Steinem:
I think you're missing the point, whether anyone listens to us or not. We don't know what Cirin wants us to do. Her last command was to bring Astoria to her for questioning. If Astoria dies in an assault we can't magically bring her back to life and if we bring her in alive . . . what are we going to do? Bring her in here and tell her to wait for Cirin to regain consciousness? She'll just declare herself the new Cirin and who can say which way that will go? She still has a good case for being the Western Pontiff. You bring her into the heart of the Eastern Church and you might as well have united the two . . .

General Dworkin:
Who said anything about bringing her in here? We take her to a cell and hold her until Cirin comes to.

General Greer:
You've got fifteen miles of sacred road between that hotel and the church. Some illusionist conjures up a lady in white robes over the carriage and we're not going to get her past the Treasury building without a full-scale uprising. She's got a handful of followers over there now. Let them make the first move. We have two legions in a ring around the hotel. It's no different from Roachland . . .

General Steinem:
Swoon Country.

General Greer:
Whatever. Or Cerebus. Cirin's pattern has been pretty obvious. She told us to anticipate little pockets of 'infection' with the Ascension at hand. In each case, her orders were the same: a strong military presence around the perimeter. No one in. No one out. Containment, pure and simple.

General Greer:
I think you can understand that with so much at stake, we need more information on her condition. Specifics.

Dr. Cameron:
I understand that. The specifics haven't changed since I examined her earlier today. She has a minor fracture of one of the bones in her right forearm. I've put a cast on and the fracture should be healed in eight to ten weeks. She has a minor fever. Her respiration is normal. Her pulse is normal.

General Greer:
And she's in a coma.

Dr. Cameron:
Well, I haven't changed my opinion on that either. A coma is brought on by three things; disease, injury or poison. She shows no symptoms of any disease with which I'm familiar, although since she can't answer any questions, all I can do is go by appearances as well as examining any bodily excretions, which have showed no abnormalities. You've provided me with samples of all the food and drink that she's consumed in the last two days and there's no sign of any poison. And apart from the fracture in her arm and some minor bruising on her shoulders and upper body from the rubble that fell on her, there's no sign of injury. Her pupils respond normally to strong light.

General Greer:
So you still think that she's . . .

Dr. Cameron:
Asleep. Yes.

General Greer:
Then why doesn't she wake up?

Dr. Cameron:
That I couldn't tell you. I've discussed this with a number of other physicians, I've referred to all texts available on the subject and I'm unable to find anything which is applicable. The world of medicine is filled with the unexplainable. We know a great deal more now than we knew ten years ago, but medical conditions that we don't recognize are not unusual. When they occur, all we can do is observe the condition and make notes on it.

General Greer:
And what happens in these unrecognizable cases?

Dr. Cameron:
The patient gets better or the patient dies.

General Greer:
Is it sorcery, then?

Dr. Cameron:
My personal opinion? As a physician I believe that unexplained conditions get blamed on sorcery because our knowledge of medicine is limited. I think when the day comes that we know all there is to know about the human body, the very idea of sorcery will vanish into the realm of folklore.

General Greer:
The soldier who brought you here will return you to your home. You will be summoned to conduct another examination around dawn.

Dr. Cameron:
Certainly. Good evening.





General Steinem:
Well, why not bring in a
witch or a healer of some
kind?

General Greer:
Consider the likelihood that
they are Illusionists. Most
of them are you know. Do
you know enough about it
to choose the right one?

General Steinem:
Well, you've brought in
that Doctor. I don't really
see that there's a great deal
of difference. Most of *them*
are Kevillists. How do *you*
know that *you* chose the
right one?

General Greer:
Dr. Cameron has provided
invaluable assistance to
Cirin in her development of
many of the potions and
medications that save
hundreds and hundreds
of . . .

General Dworkin:
Maybe *he* poisoned her.
Have you considered that?
Swabbing those pads
around in her mouth and
her nostrils and her ears
and her . . . her . . .

General Greer:
He said that bodily
excretions are the only
things that he has to . . .

General Dworkin:
It's unnatural, is all.
Unnatural and disrespect-
ful. The living incarnation of
the Goddess is in our care
and we stand around with
our mouths open while
some pervert goes poking
and prodding around under
her night-shirt as if she
were some sort of . . .

General Steinem:
I agree. So much of this
is starting to seem like a
judgement on us all. The
mountain crushes the
Upper City for the first time
in history and then we allow
ourselves to be a party to
the violation of the Living
Goddess. I think we've
earned her disfavour for
becoming as corrupt as
Astoria herself. The
Goddess is testing our
purity and I say we've
failed Her.

General Greer:
This is no time for some
hysterical . . .

General Dworkin:
Haven't you noticed the
smell in here? We've
brought corruption on
ourselves. We've become
a party to it. A catalyst for
it. Everything we do just
drags us deeper and
deeper into the cesspool
Cirin has always warned us
about. What are we going to
do? Answer me that.
What are we going to *do*?

General Greer:
The only thing we *can* do.
Wait for Cirin to awaken.

the
most
isolated
location
in my
realm.



I
must
pause
and
...

Think.



events are
unfolding
...
quickly.



countless
futures
countless
possibilities
Can Man or
God alter
their course?



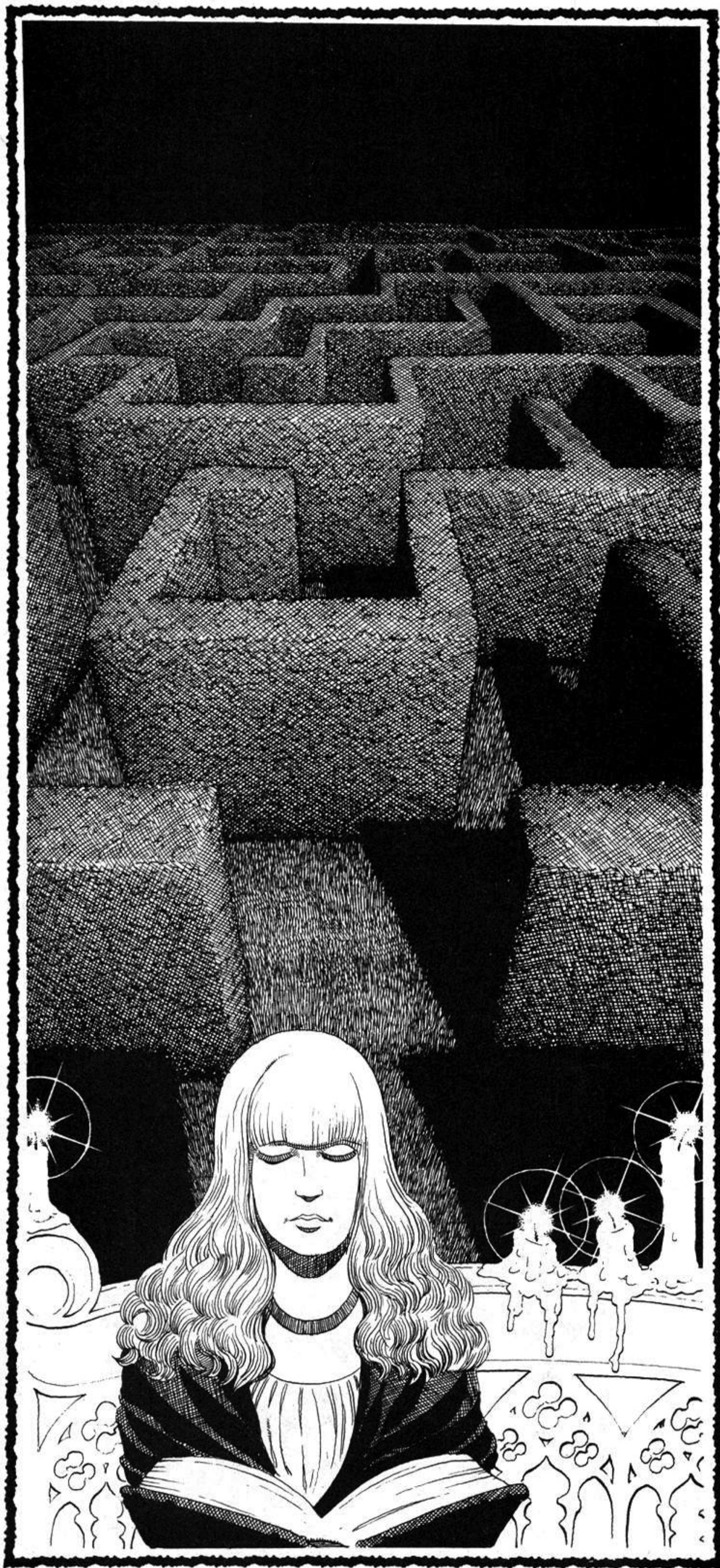
I search
for Truth
and I
find...

only...

questions.







ND THEN JAKA understood. The maze and the book and her life were all connected.

Each baffle in the maze had been another chapter in the book; another episode in her life. It was dancing that moved her forward. When dancing was the center of her life she made progress through the maze. When dancing was not the center of her life, she would re-read the same paragraph a dozen times without comprehension. The maze would close itself off, becoming a small and confining cell with hedges for walls and try as she might she would be unable to find an exit. Then, just as suddenly, her mind would cease its wandering and she would be caught up in the story unfolding before her, unaware that she had turned a page or finished a chapter. Within the maze, an opening would appear and she would find the seemingly-endless passages were suddenly as familiar to her as the back of her own hand. Now, she was nearing her destination, the center of the maze. She turned right and then left and then right again. In a moment's time, she had stepped into a wide and quiet clearing. At its center was an ornate stone chair, intricately carved. On the back of the chair were four white candles, burning brightly and filling the air with the pleasing scent of blossoms in spring-time. On the seat itself there was a book. She picked it up and traced the gilt lettering on the front with her finger-tip. 'Jaka's Story', it said. She opened the cover and began to read.



IF I CAN DO IT, YOU CAN, the book began. The first page described the maze in such vivid terms that she could see it before her eyes, as if she were a bird

flying above it. While she had so often felt that the hedges grew and that the passageways went from wide to narrow, she could see now that the height of the hedges and the width of the passageways were uniform and symmetrical.

She was aware that a small girl had stepped forward into the clearing and she felt, then, a pang of anxiety. She didn't wish to stop reading. But, if the child spoke to her, she would have to answer out of politeness. Even as she thought this, however, the child dropped lightly onto the carefully-groomed carpet of grass and began speaking in a low voice to her doll.

You see, Missy, the child was saying, things really don't change at all. It's just that when you're afraid or when you're angry or when you're sad, you can't see that *you're* the one who changed; not everyone and everything else.

Jaka could feel that the child was very much at peace being by herself, with only her little doll for company.

If I can do it, you can.

It was the way the story began and the way that the story ended.

Even as Jaka marvelled at the simple, yet inviolable balance of the book, life and maze, she sensed that the little girl was now standing beside her, looking up at her with wide and compassionate eyes.

Cerebus is alive, you know, she whispered.

And he loves you very much.





WHY DON'T
YOU JUST

YOU
KNOW

BELT
HER.

Hit a
...
woman?

But

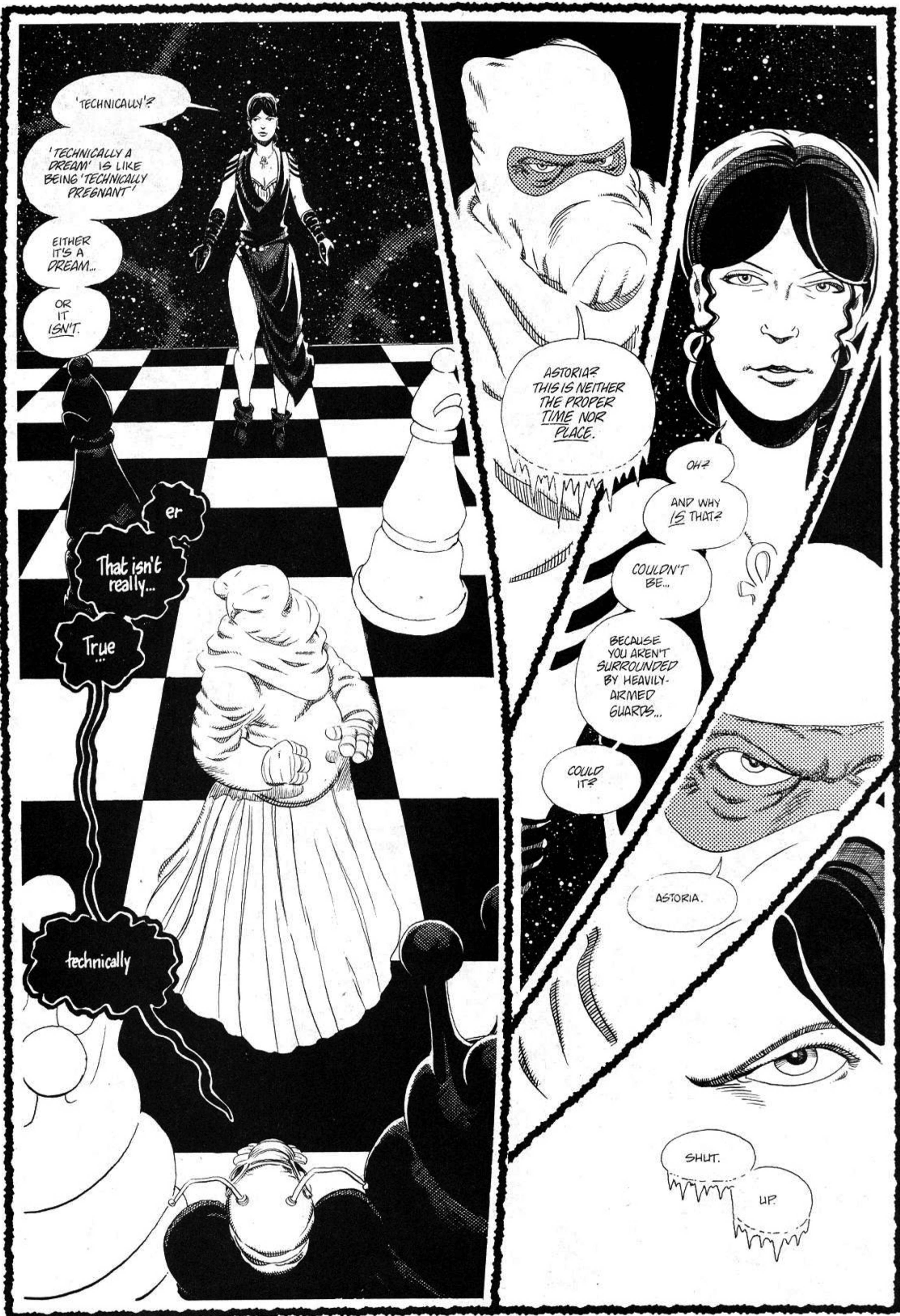
But

NO 'BUTS'
ABOUT
IT.

YOU CAN DO
ANYTHING
IN A DREAM

AND THIS
IS A DREAM
ISN'T
IT...

er...
technically
that's
true.



'TECHNICALLY'?

'TECHNICALLY A DREAM' IS LIKE BEING 'TECHNICALLY PREGNANT'

EITHER IT'S A DREAM...

OR IT ISN'T.

er

That isn't really...

True...

technically

ASTORIA? THIS IS NEITHER THE PROPER TIME NOR PLACE.

OH?

AND WHY IS THAT?

COULDN'T BE...

BECAUSE YOU AREN'T SURROUNDED BY HEAVILY-ARMED GUARDS...

COULD IT?

ASTORIA.

SHUT.

UP.



erm...

ulk

excuse
me

ladies

but
Hlk

I can't
pardon
me

I... bly
zak
kig

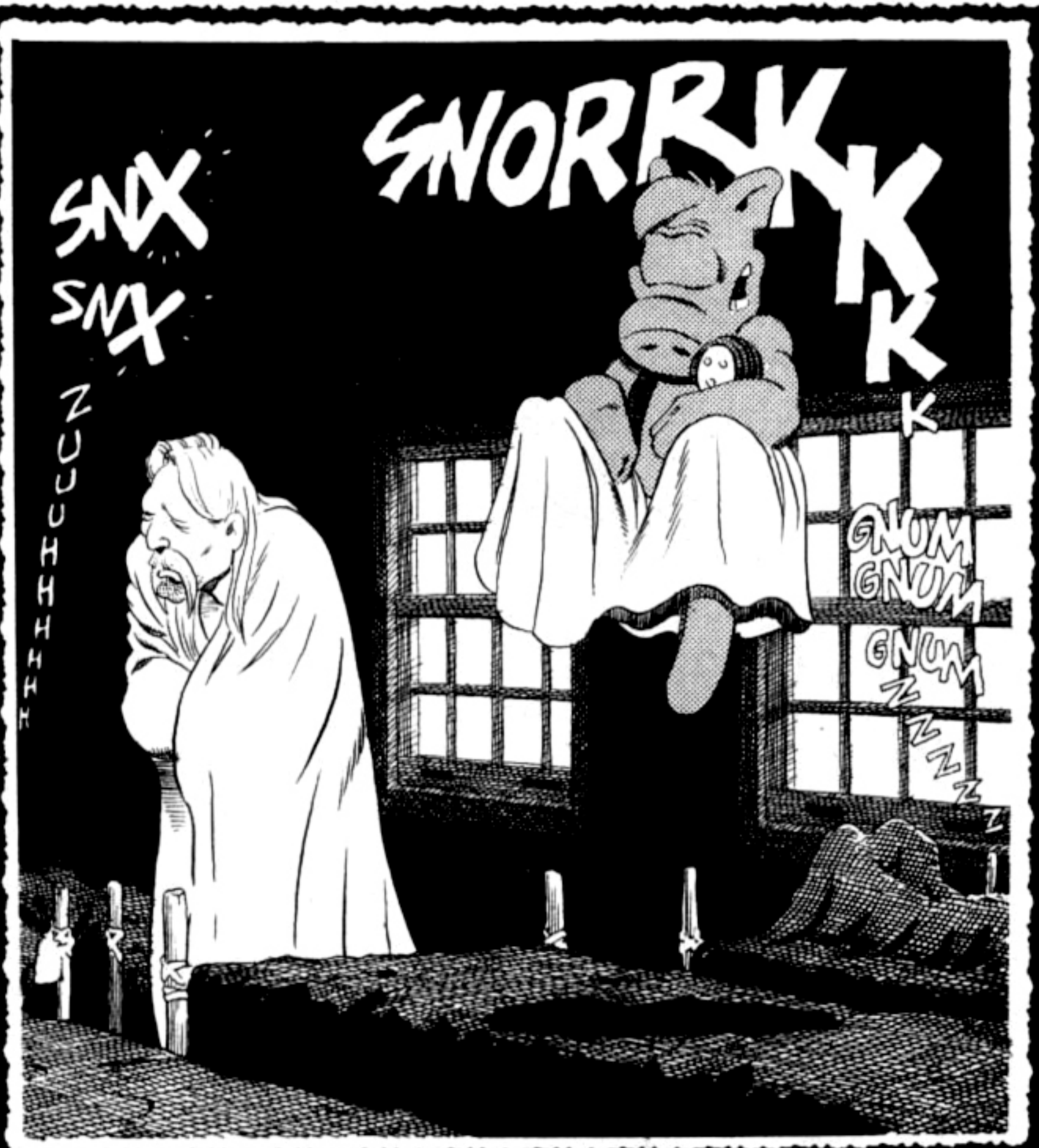
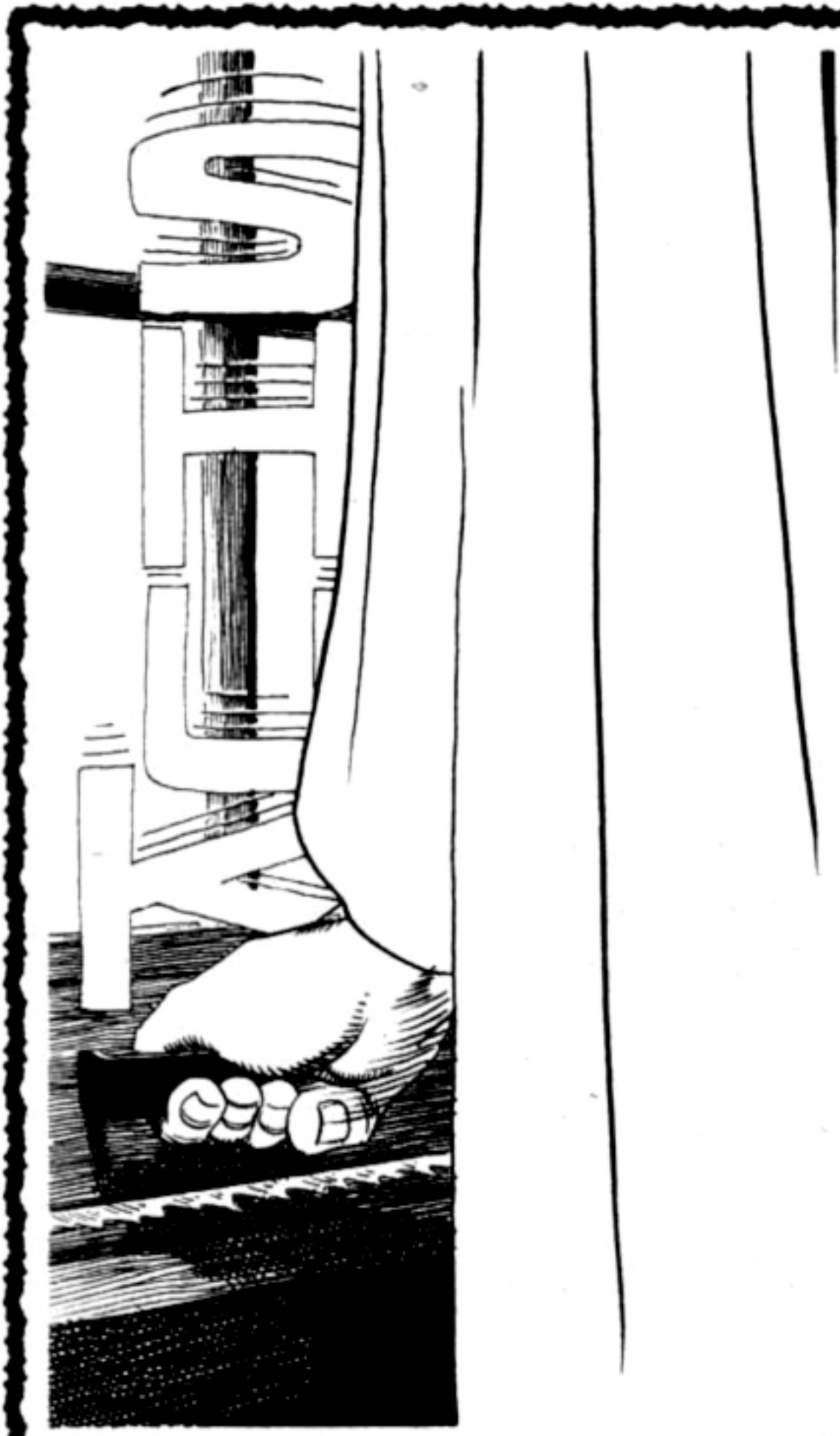
AND
WHAT IS
IT...

SPECIFICALLY...

THAT YOU
WISH ME
TO KNOW...

ABOUT
BISHOPS?







General Steinem:
Look! Look at that.
Another welt. He just
walked into the room
and another welt
appears on her face.

Dr. Cameron:
Please let me
examine her.
If you'll just . . .

General Dworkin:
Examine her?
It's your
examinations that've
led to this. What have
you done to her?

General Greer:
Please.
There can't be any
harm in this . . .

General Steinem:
I think you've
said quite
enough already.
This is sorcery.
Open your eyes.

General Dworkin:
Yes. Sorcery.
Dr. Cameron,
you stand accused
of sorcerous
interference . . .

General Greer:
Wait. Wait.
This is . . .

General Steinem:
You shut up,
unless you want to
be tried with him.
Sorcerous
interference.
Verdict?

General Dworkin:
Guilty.

General Greer:
Innocent.

General Steinem:
Sorcerous
interference.
Verdict?

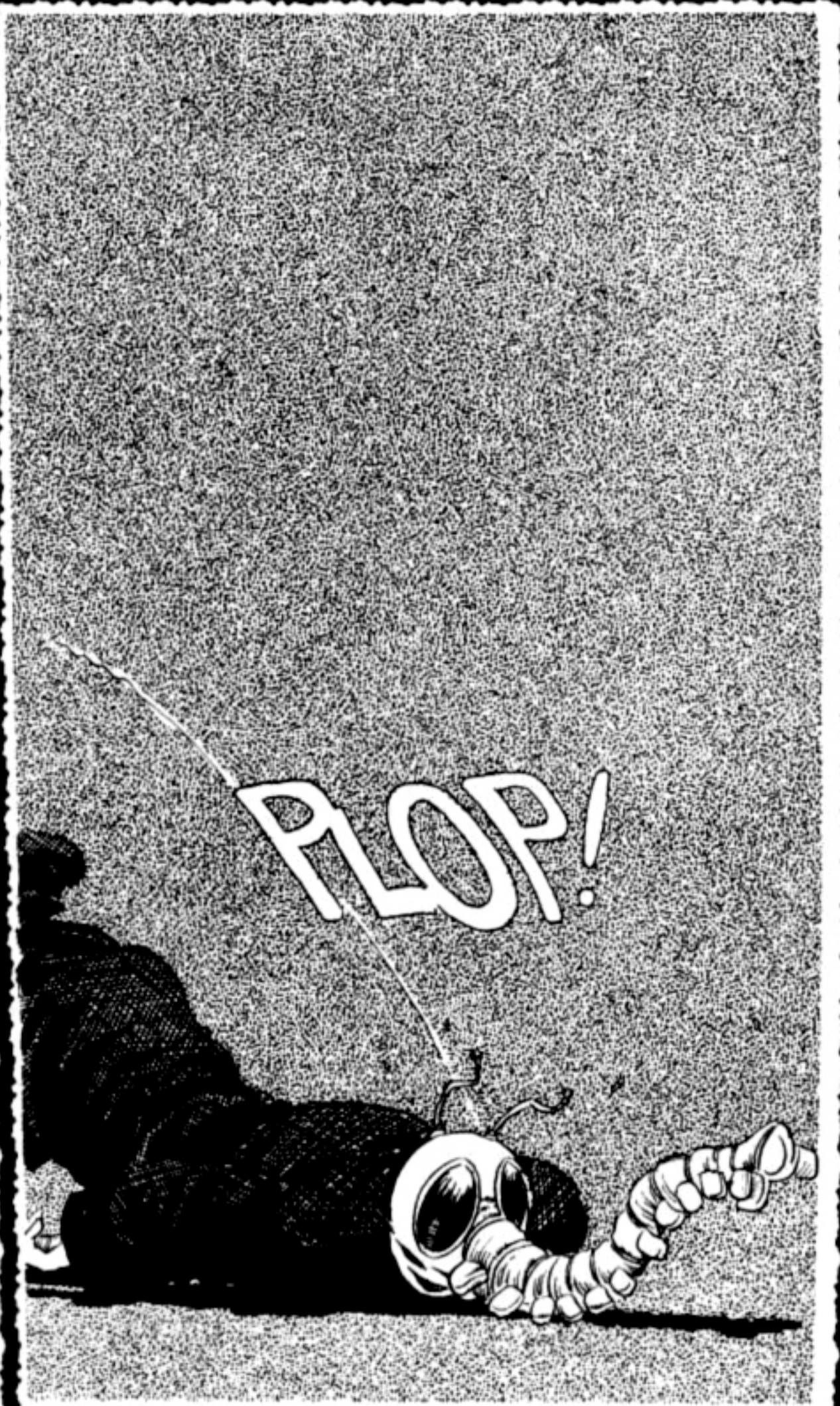
General Dworkin:
Guilty.

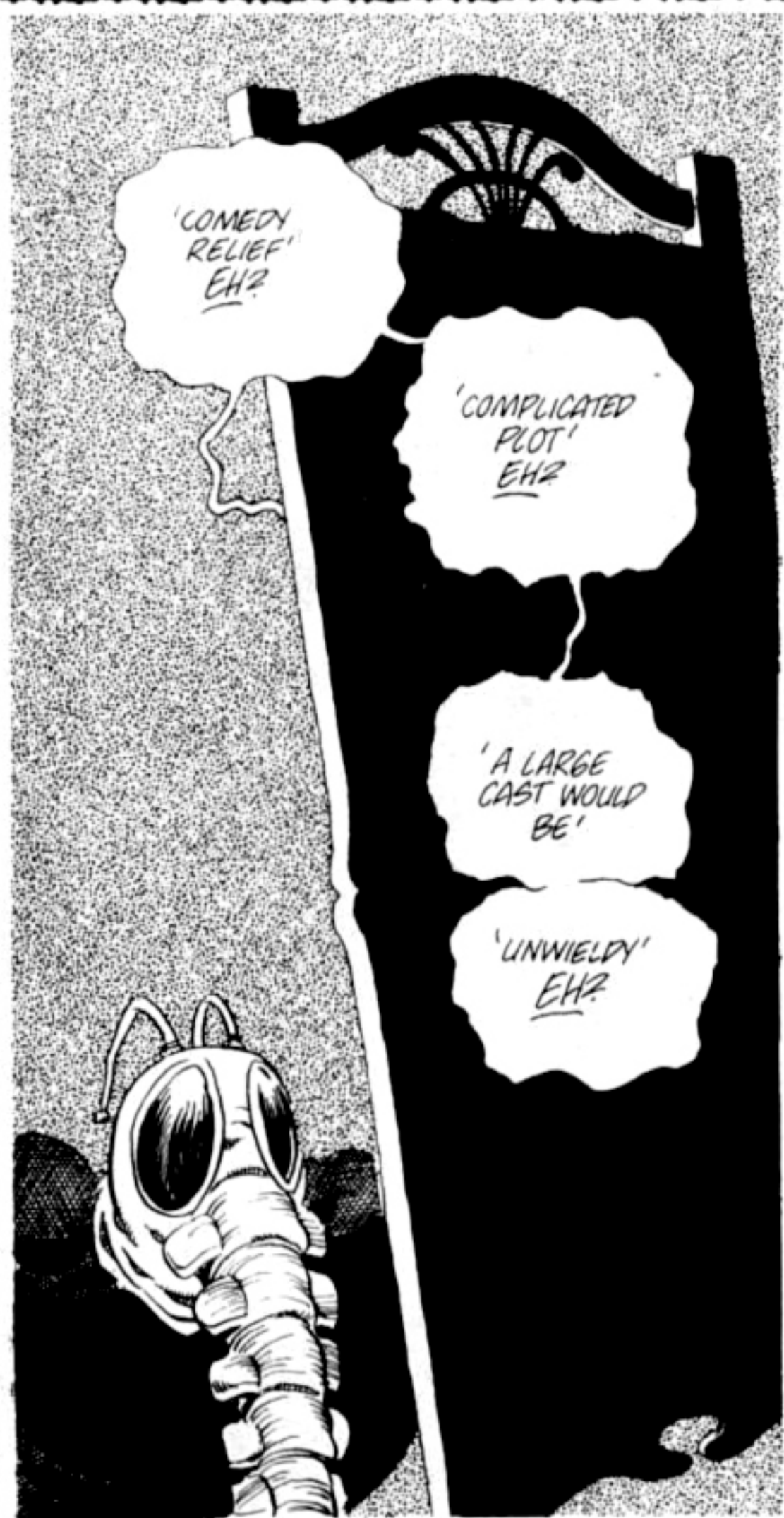
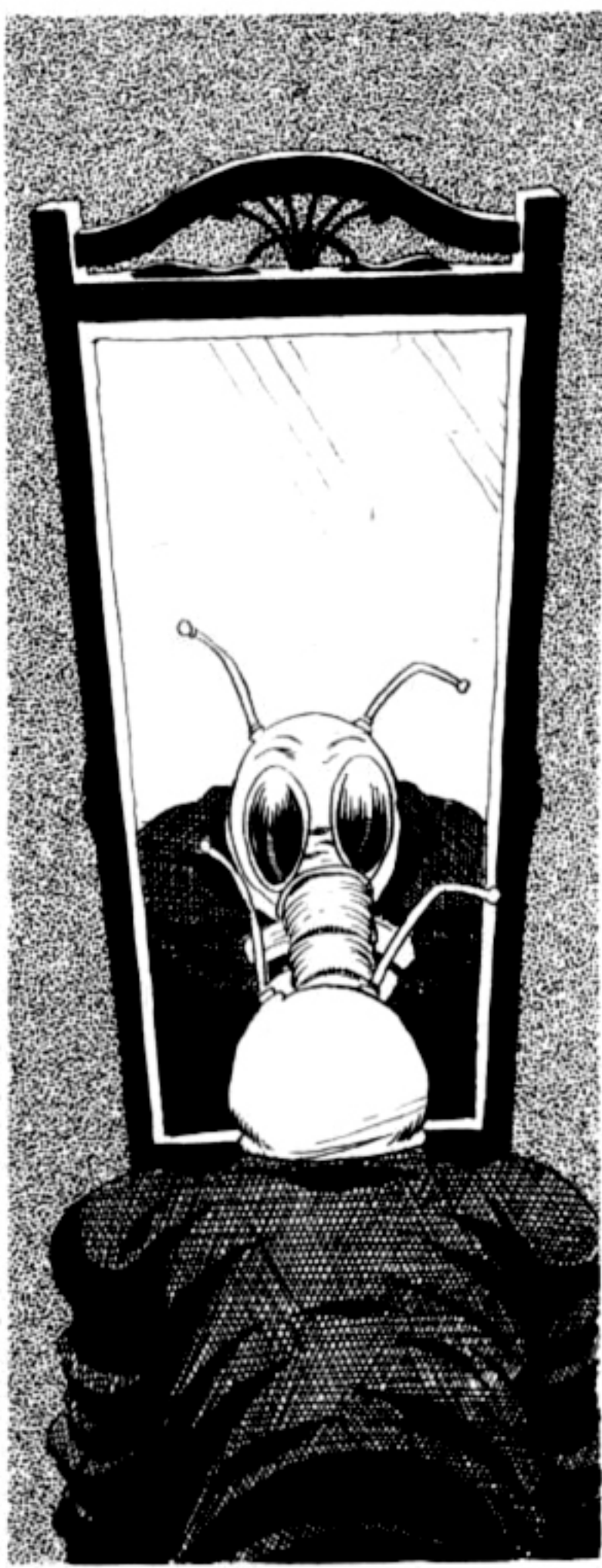
General Greer:
Innocent.
If you'll just let
me say one . . .

General Steinem:
We can't permit
you to interfere
and violate the
clear parameters
of rendering a
decision.
I repeat.
Sorcerous
interference.
Verdict?









SMART
MONKEY
AREN'T YOU?

THINK
YOU'RE A
REEEAL
SMART
MONKEY!

TWEET

TWEET

TINKLE
TINK
TINKLE
WAK

JUST
\$WOON
'N' \$NUFF EH?
AS IF YER
BELOVED
SISTER
\$ULK
COULDN'T
USE TH' DAMN
WORK!

I KNOW
WHAT YOU TWO
DEGENERATES
DO WITH EACH
OTHER DOWN
THERE, TOO!

DON'T
THINK
THAT I
...

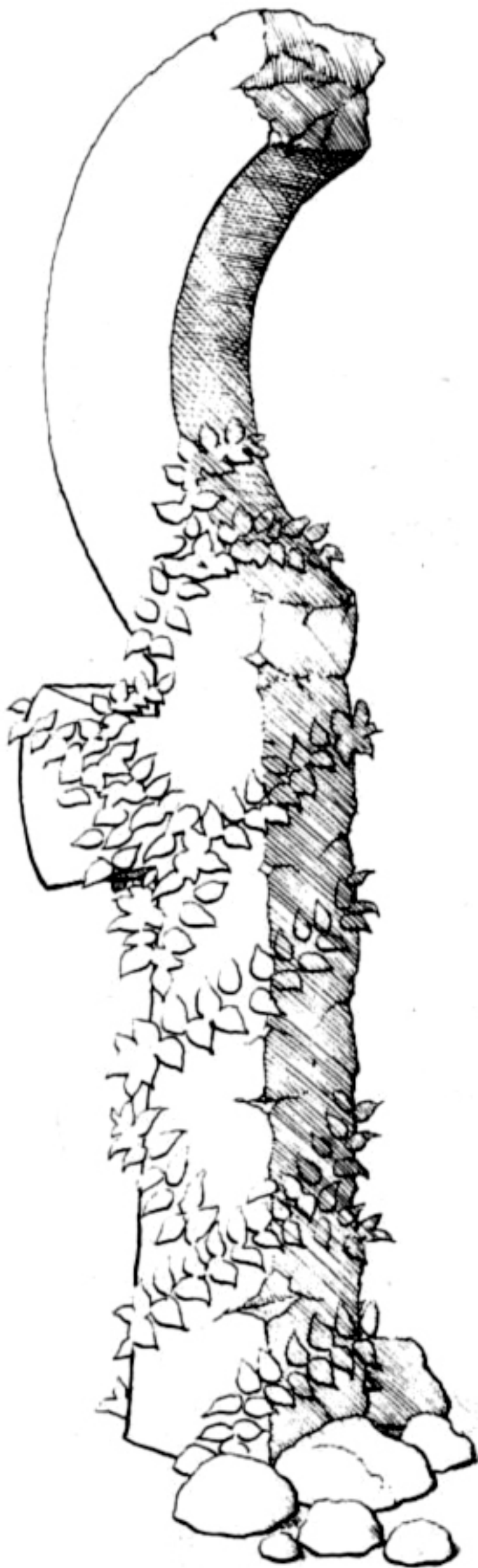
MOTHER!

POIT!

I'M SORRY! I
THOUGHT YOU
WERE HAVING
A BAD DREAM...

DAMN.

AND JUST WHEN
IT WAS GETTING
INTERESTING...



I am an old woman, of course, and so the various threats of punishment by our beloved government bother me not in the least. You are quite young however and so I suggest that you destroy this letter after you read it.

The answer to your question is that it just happened. Almost all of our men-folk were killed in the last great invasion by the Sepran Empire; either in the war itself or at the time of their withdrawal to within the borders of Lower Felda. We were raised to be ladies and with all of the natural obedience and politeness that that entails. How could we resist someone like Cirin? We had survived the Sepran occupation with our heads bowed and now that they were gone we had traded one military dictatorship for another. To be honest, I don't think any of us had considered that it would last. There was more food for the babies, fewer rapes; it was hard to see where that was so bad. But we had lost something vital. Back before the Cirinists; before the occupation by the Seprans (I'm so old, you know, I'm one of the few who can remember back that far) there was a balance and, truth be told, that balance favoured the women. Your great-great grandfather and I lived the same way that everyone else did. The men-folk had their work and they worked hard. Life wasn't easy, but we always had food on the table and not one of our five children ever went hungry. The women worked hard, too, make no mistake. But the men worked in competition with each other; some getting richer and some getting poorer and it would take its toll. I watched your great-great grandfather get old almost overnight when the trade routes started to change and they started the whole idea of tariffs in Iest and Palnu. He couldn't do a thing about it and it hurt his pride and he had to work even harder to bring in the same money he had before. My life, a woman's life, was a regular thing; like a monk or a priest, you see. The work occupied my time and my attention, but it gave me an inner peace that you don't see now. I watched my children grow up and I knew all the secrets of life first-hand. It was

power, but it was a quiet kind of power, the thing that keeps it all going. We weren't trying to change anything, we were just keeping it going, we were part of it. I tried to make your great-great grandfather happy, because I knew him being out all day earning our daily bread that there wasn't a lot of happiness for him. We never talked about his work. As I used to tell him, he can leave his work outside or he can sleep outside with it. I like to think I was a comfort to him. He always looked a little younger in the morning when he went to work and I felt I owed him that much. Our home was a place he had built for us and I was there to help him lay aside his burden, cook him a warm meal and let him know there was someone who cared and who appreciated what he did for me and for his children. You know, you're the first one in the family who ever asked me about the olden times? I don't say much, because I don't think it's a woman's place; that's not the way I was raised. But I look at your mother and your aunts and their children when they come to visit and that . . . magic I guess you'd call it is gone. They fight about the things I used to make your great-great grandfather leave outside at night. They hardly notice their children which is to be expected when they give them over to strangers every morning to feed and to raise. The children are cold and it makes me sad to see. The really young ones, I'll tell them stories and play silly games with them and they'll light right up and the magic getting released from them is enough to make you cry til you never stop. By the time they're five or six, though, it's too late. They're hard and they're cold, just like their mothers. Strangers can only teach them how to be good strangers, I guess. They make fun of their fathers and they run wild or they accuse each other of being traitors and threaten to turn each other in to the Cirinist soldiers outside. A girl who hasn't even had her time yet owns more than your great-great grandfather and I ever had and all they want is more.

I just sound like a cranky old woman, don't I? I didn't know how happy I was way back when because I had nothing to compare it to. They tell me that I was oppressed. When I hear the word I think of your great-great grandfather because when I hear the word, I picture a burden that just gets bigger and bigger as you go along, a big weight that gets bigger as your strength begins to fail and finally it just crushes you. That was your great-great grandfather. My burden got lighter. The children grew up and they didn't need me every minute of every day like they did when they were younger, which is how it should be. With what they tell me now, your great-great grandfather and I should have both been carrying these enormous burdens and let the children fend for themselves. Your aunts and your mother are like your great-great grandfather; old before their time with these great weights on their shoulders as their strength begins to

Trial evidence 1411
Cirinist Government of Upper Felda
verdict: guilty
sentence: execution

Lord Julius:
How about this; "Ladies and gentlemen
of the jury . . ."

Baskin:
Er. It's "The Joint Upper Felda and
lest Commission on Interest Rate Policy",
Lord Julius. It's not a jury.

Lord Julius:
A lot *you* know about it.

Baskin:
There won't be any 'gentlemen' is what I mean.

Lord Julius:
All right. How about; "Esteemed ladies
of the Joint Upper Felda . . ."

Baskin:
They don't like to be called "ladies",
Lord Julius. They consider it patronizing.

Lord Julius:
Patronizing! Don't they know an ingratiating
distortion when they hear it? All right.
What about; "My worthy opponents of the
Joint Upper Felda . . ."

Baskin:
No no no. We want to persuade them
that we're on their side; that we want
to find a workable compromise.

Lord Julius:
Oh, is *that* what we want?

Baskin:
Yes. We want to show them that we're
meeting with them in a spirit of cooperation
and that we share their concerns.

Lord Julius:
All right. What about "Esteemed
representatives of the Joint Upper Felda and
lest Commission on Interest Rate Policy."

Baskin:
Good. Very good.

Lord Julius:
"I welcome you today in a spirit
of cooperation and shared concerns."

Baskin:
Very good. Go on.

Lord Julius:
I can't. I'm stuck.

Baskin:
Stuck?

Lord Julius:
Yeah. I don't know what their concerns are.

Baskin:
Their concern is that they think
your interest rates are too high and
they want to know the reason.

Lord Julius:
They want to know the reason? All right.
"The reason that you think my interest rates are
too high is that you aren't taxing your citizens
enough. If you double your tax rates, my
interest rates will fade to insignificance."

Baskin:
No no. They want to know the
reason the interest rates are high; not the
reason they *think* they're too high.

Lord Julius:
Well, tell them to make up their minds.
How about this; "I share your concerns
about high interest rates. For the life of me,
I can't figure it out either."

Baskin:
I think they'll want more information.
More specifics.



Lord Julius:
"Specifically, I can't figure out why they're at eighteen and a quarter per cent."

Baskin:
Perhaps. Perhaps if you could explain how you arrived at that figure.

Lord Julius:
That's just it; the number I pulled out of the hat was seventeen and a half.
Listen, I can't get up any momentum with you interrupting all the time.
You there. With the cereal bowl on your head. What do we have so far?

Me:
"Esteemed representatives of the Joint Upper Felda and lest Commission on Interest Rate Policy. I welcome you today in a spirit of cooperation and shared concerns. I share your concerns about high interest rates. For the life of me, I can't figure it out either. Specifically, I can't figure out why they're at eighteen and a quarter per cent . . ."

Lord Julius:
". . . when the number I pulled out of the hat was seventeen and a half. As I think about it, here before you, my suspicions are aroused. And believe me, as I look at all of you, that's the only thing that's aroused."

Baskin:
Lord Julius.

Lord Julius:
All right. Strike that last sentence. "My suspicions are aroused. Could it be that the number was actually the little ticket indicating the size of hat? For I recall, quite clearly, that the hat was unusually large . . ."

Baskin:
Lord Julius. Please. They're looking for specifics.

Lord Julius:
". . . was unusually large and of a soft gray material seldom found in sub-temperate climates. As I consider this now, a great deal seems to hinge on the size of head of the hat's owner. Further, since at no time did I see the figures marked on any of the other slips of paper, it is impossible for me to say with any degree of certainty whether the number in question was high relative to the other numbers or low. Moreover, there is still the question of how seventeen and a half per cent became eighteen and a quarter per cent; a question which concerns all of us here today."

Baskin:
Good. Good. Keep going.

Lord Julius:
"Thank you for your time and attention and I hope you enjoy the petit fours and watery lemonade on sale in the foyer."

Baskin:
Lord Julius.

Lord Julius:
"A question which concerns all of us here today. In the interests of cooperation and shared concern I propose therefore that you join me in merging the "Palnan Executive Commission on Floating Interest Rate Policy" and your own "Joint Upper Felda and lest Commission on Interest Rate Policy" into a new and more effective "Double-Jointed Upper Felda/lest and Palnu Commission on Interest Rate Reduction and Fiscal Responsibility". As a concrete demonstration of my solemn commitment to this vital issue, I will authorize an immediate doubling of each commission member's salary, tripling of the commission's operating budget, the quadrupling of the commission's research and support staff and . . ." What's 'times five' again?

Baskin:
Quintupling.

Lord Julius:
". . . and quintupling of the current allocation of office space and office decoration budget. Furthermore, I will sign into law tomorrow a proclamation giving the new Double-Jointed Commission a free hand, an open door and a clean slate for a period of not less than two years, ensuring that its examination of the issue will be as thorough and as all-encompassing as possible; at the conclusion of which, the commission's report will be submitted to the three governments participating for swift and decisive examination and discussion with an eye toward full implementation within an appropriate time-frame."

Baskin:
Perfect.

Lord Julius:
Have the boys at State throw in a few warm reminiscences at the end there about Palnu's long and happy association with those meddlesome vultures.

Baskin:
Yes, Lord Julius.

Lord Julius:
Hang that big ugly picture of Cirin behind the podium; make sure it's high enough so you can't see the holes the darts made.

Baskin:
Yes, Lord Julius.





AH.

YOU'RE
AWAKE.

I'M AFRAID THE
KITCHEN DIDN'T
HAVE ANY CHEESE
AT ALL...

SO I BROUGHT
YOU HALF OF A
GRAPEFRUIT INSTEAD.
I HOPE THAT'S
"

I'M

I'M NOT
HUNGRY.

OH!

WELL.

CAN I
GET YOU
SOMETHING
ELSE?

SCOTCH.

I'D LIKE
A GLASS OF
"

SCOTCH.

ER.

YES, GREAT
ASTORIA.

RIGHT
AWAY.



General
Steinem:
Great Cirin!

Cirin:
Dreams.
Dreams and
reality.

General
Greer:
You're awake.

Cirin:
Yes. No.
Wakefulness
is the issue.
The dreams
and reality
are merging.
The first act
of violence.
The first and
the last.
It must be.

General
Greer:
We thought
that you . . .

Cirin:
Quiet. I must
say these
things. They
must be writ-
ten down.
Wakefulness.
Focus.
Division must
be resisted.
There's a
contradiction.
Extreme
focus means
that much is
lost in the
periphery.
In seeing
the overall
picture, detail
is lost. It is
summed up
in those two
things. The
dismissal of
contrary view-
points brings
division.
Is that
inevitable?
Accommo-
dation without
corruption.
The two
queens
crush the
manifestation
of the dream.
They grow
larger and
if that contin-
ues unabated,
the bishops
will prevail.
Inactivity
is their
strength.
Stasis serves
their purpose.
Awareness.
Unawareness.
Dream.
Reality.
Presented as
a problem.
Whom shall
stasis serve
when . . . ?



Cirin:
My arm.
What is this?
What has
happened?

General
Steinem:
Great Cirin ...

Cirin:
Quiet. Quiet.
The chariot.
The chariot a
carriage. The
Tower falls.
Motion and
discord. All
must be
calm. Stasis
can serve
us as well.
Calm and
understand-
ing; an
accommoda-
tion. Yes it is
time. It must
be time. The
Goddess
pulls aside
her mask
and has
two faces.
Heresy.
Heresy to
one or both.
The impuri-
ties can only
be that which
divides us.
What is left to
us when the
disagree-
ments are set
aside? The
Goddess
speaks of
accommoda-
tion to us
both. All else
must fall
away like a
snake shed-
ding its skin.
Calm. Stasis.
Our momen-
tum can carry
us, but we
must let the
divisiveness
fall away.
And what
aids our
cause? What
brings about
this accom-
modation?

General
Greer:
Everything
is being
written
down.

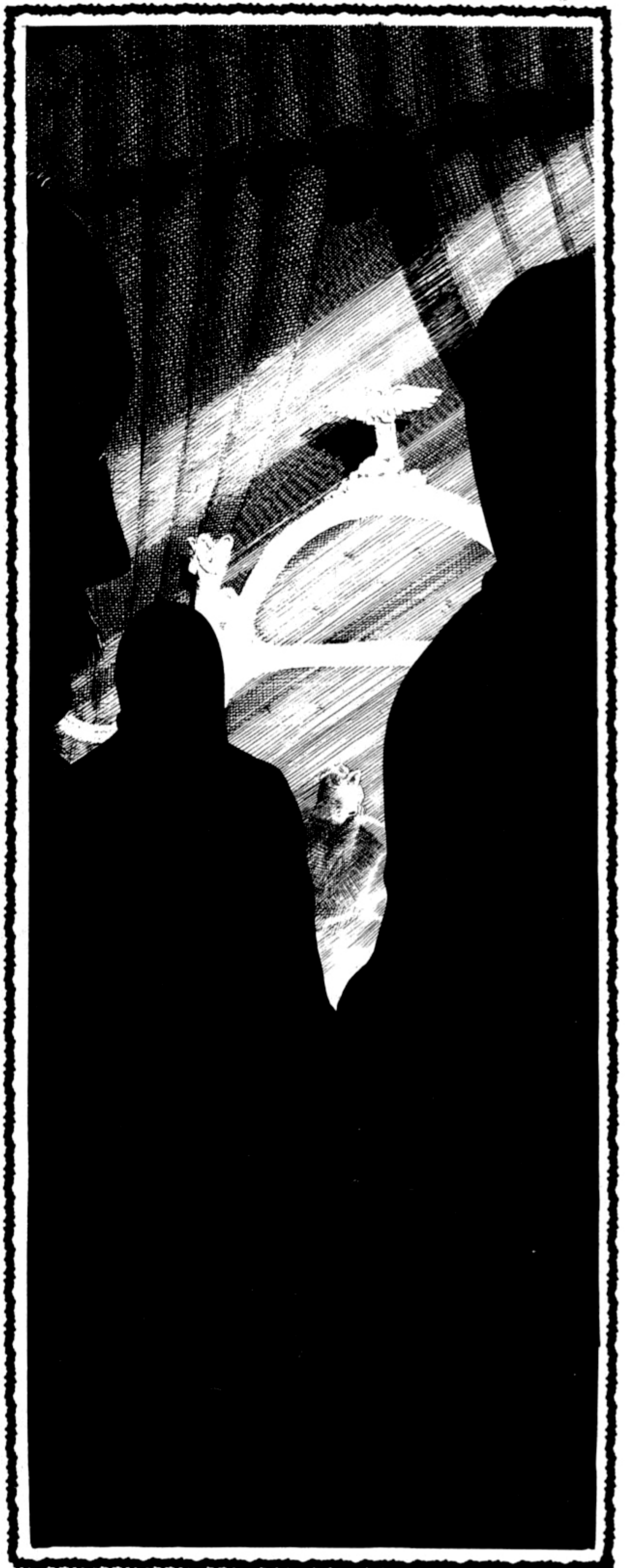
Cirin:
Yes. Yes.
You are
here as well,
aren't you.
You are my
dream and
my reality.
I could hear
you. You

have a
single voice.
The others
who are
here. No one
must speak.

No ques-
tions. A deli-
cate balance
in the border
between
wakefulness
and dream,
as fine as
the web of a
spider. The
one who just
spoke. Who

said that
everything is
being written
down. Stay.
Stay by me.
The others
must leave.

Now.
Quietly. I will
discuss all
of this with
you later.
For now the
connection
must be
maintained
and it is
fragile.
Leave me.
Leave me
now.





Cirin:

The stenographer stayed as well. That is indeed our strength. Everything is being written down. And you are calm. I can feel it. The transcriptions and how we have used them. You know, don't you? They are a strength and yet so much has been lost. I began to rely on summaries. I was eavesdropping on my own sycophants. Allowing them ... no, honesty now ...

encouraging them to flatter me. How long since I have reviewed a conversation that troubled me; that raised doubt? What is between the lines; what is the subtext? What was actually being said? How tempting to request only summaries; a few paragraphs of empty flattery, idle gossip. All that would cause offense to me was excluded, stripped away and hidden from me. Like a man. Very like a man.

General Greer:
I've ...
thought that.

Cirin:

Yes, and then censored yourself out of loyalty; the implied requirement of my retreat into dreams; into reality manufactured and ... foolish. So very foolish.

It *is* calm, now. Can we sustain this? Our voices are like two parts of the same melody. How wonderful. Do you hear her? Do you hear her voice?



ER...NO.
I DON'T

IT'S AS IF SHE
WERE RIGHT HERE
IN THE ROOM WITH
ME

SHE'S SAYING
WHAT I'M SAYING
WORD FOR WORD.

IT'S LIKE AN
ECHO-- AS IF WE
WERE... ACTING IN
A PLAY...

READING
OUR LINES
...

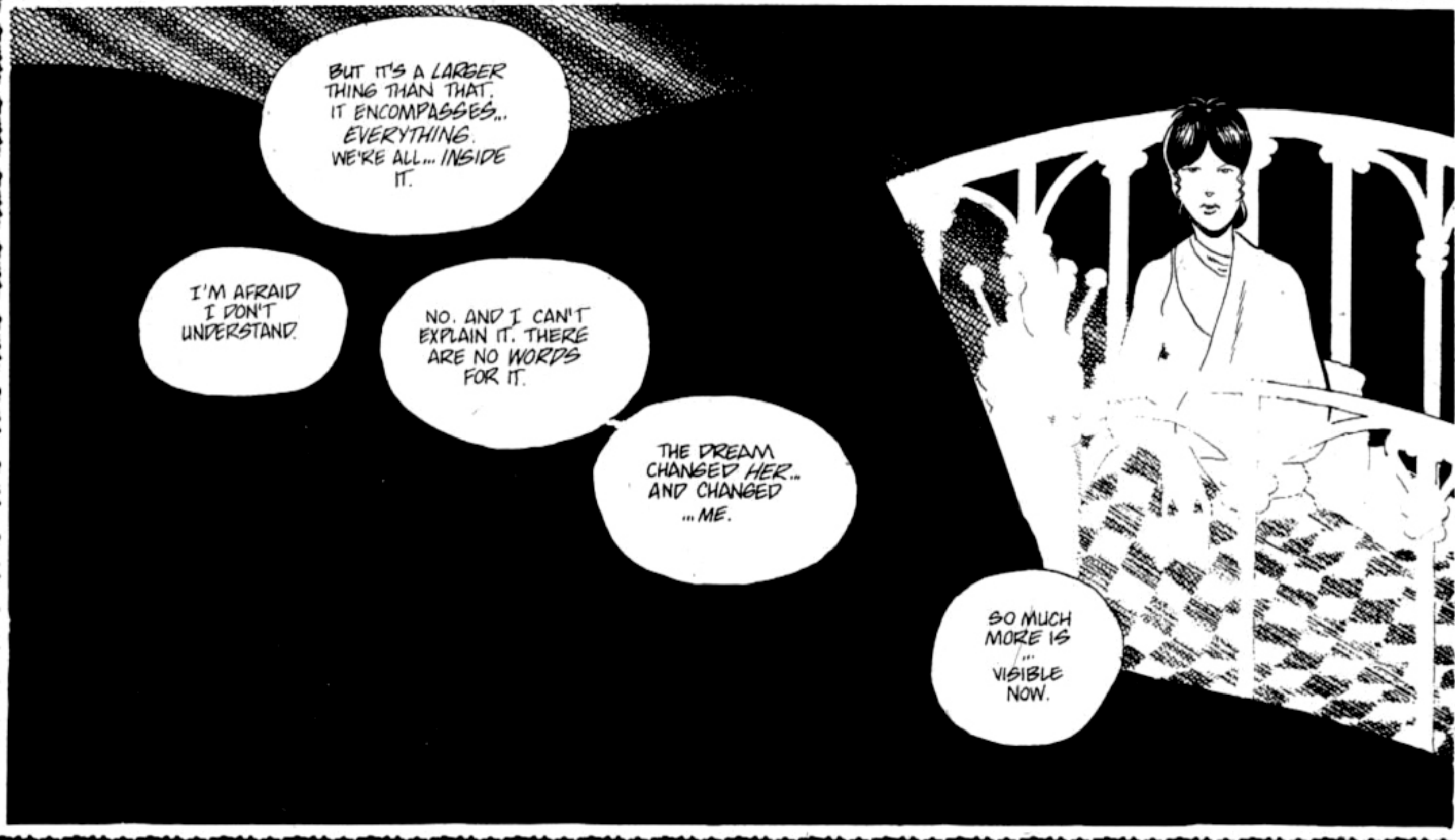


SORCERY,
THEN?

NO.

NOT IN THE WAY
THAT YOU MEAN
ANYWAY.

SORCERY WILL
BE THE CHARGE.
SORCERY IS
ALWAYS
THE CHARGE.



BUT IT'S A LARGER
THING THAN THAT.
IT ENCOMPASSES...
EVERYTHING.
WE'RE ALL... INSIDE
IT.

I'M AFRAID
I DON'T
UNDERSTAND.

NO. AND I CAN'T
EXPLAIN IT. THERE
ARE NO WORDS
FOR IT.

THE DREAM
CHANGED HER...
AND CHANGED
... ME.

SO MUCH
MORE IS
...
VISIBLE
NOW.



ARE YOU...
ALL RIGHT?

OH, YES.
MY ARM IS
SORE.

I'M ALSO A
LITTLE...
DISORIENTED

SO MANY
LAYERS...

WHAT YOU
JUST ASKED

'ARE YOU
ALL RIGHT?'



ARE ALL
OF US
'RIGHT?'

THE
ANSWER,
I THINK

IS
'NO'

COLLECTIVELY
SPEAKING
...



'ALL OF
US'
AREN'T.



'UNWIELDY'
INDEED, LITTLE
BROTHER

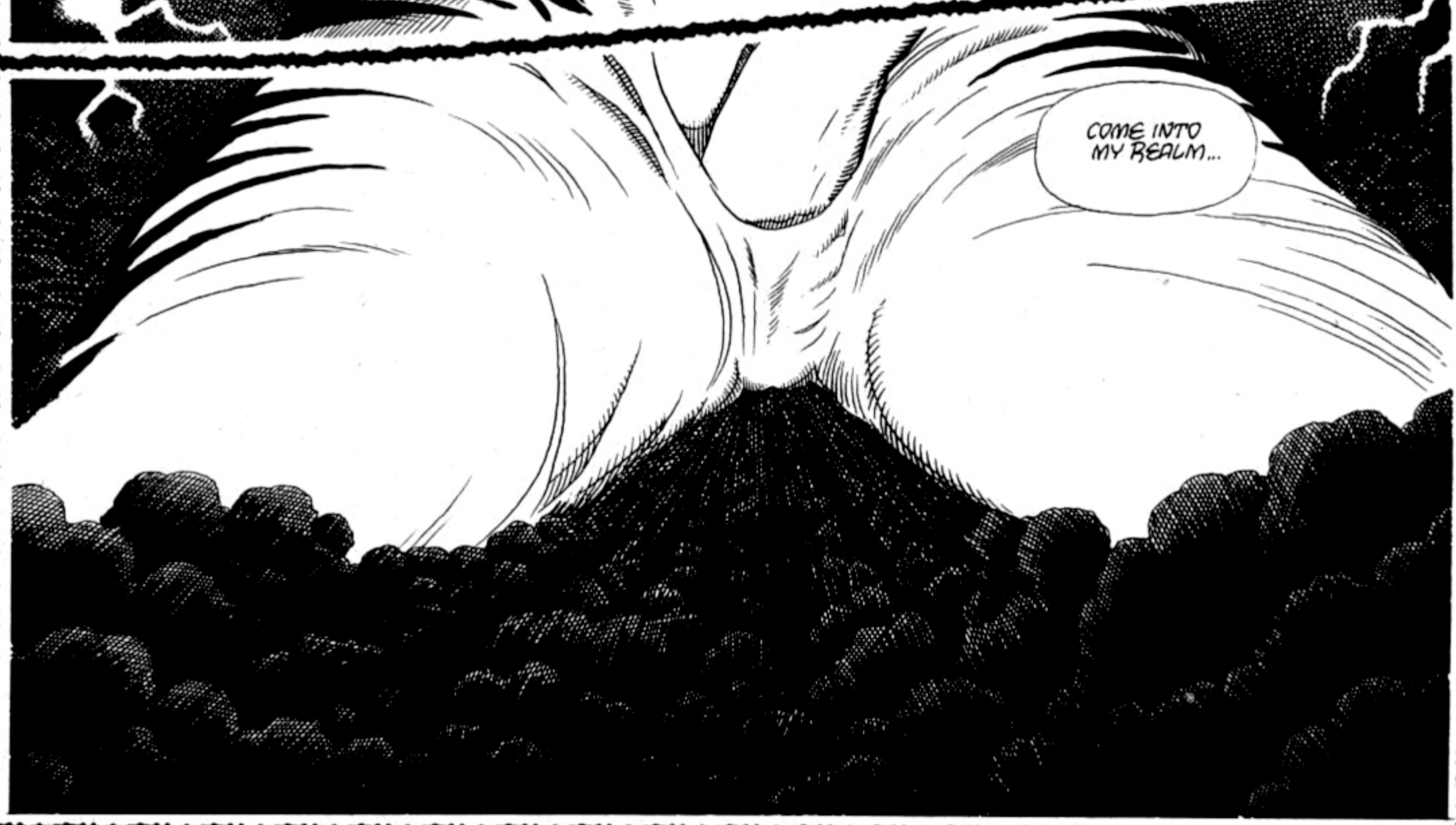
HAVE YOU FORGOTTEN
THAT IT WAS YOUR
BIG SISTER
\$LEAZE

WHO SET
ALL THESE
EVENTS IN
MOTION?

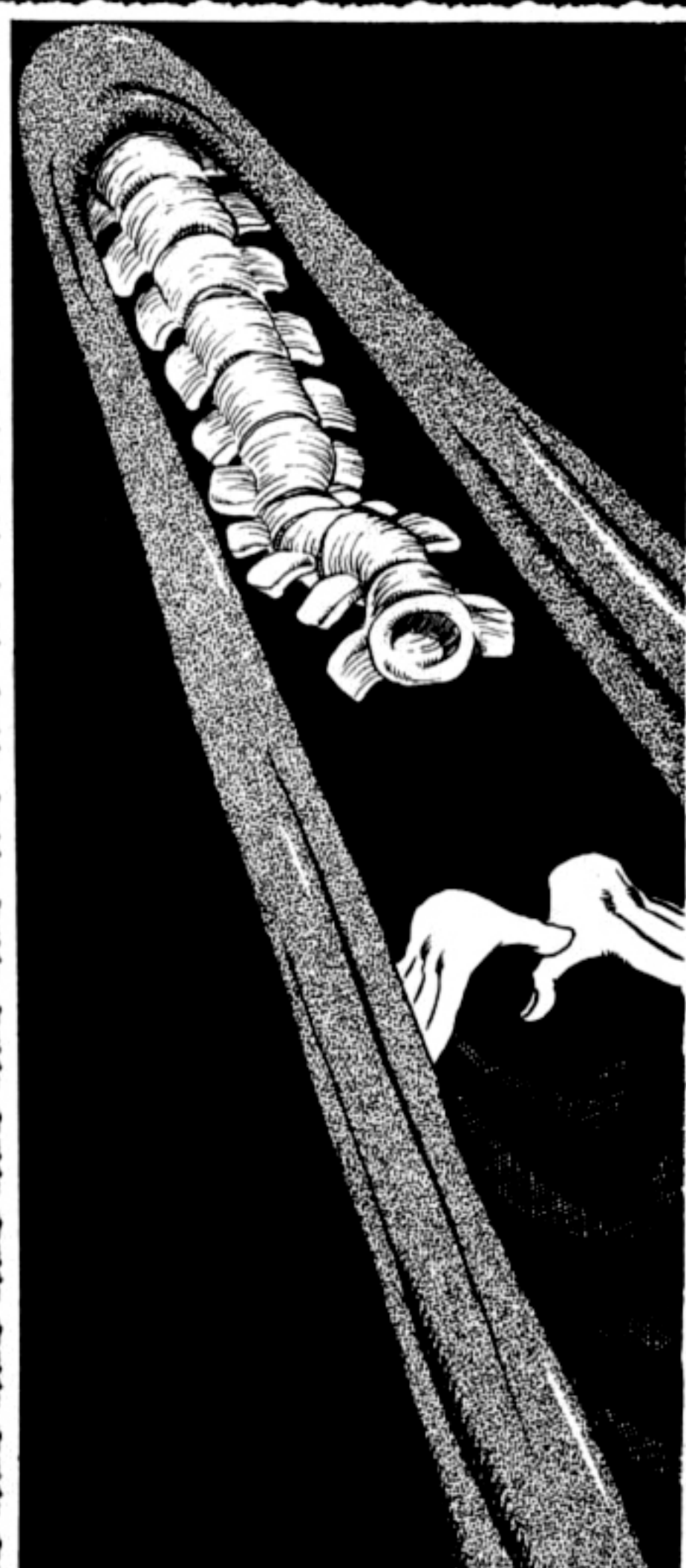
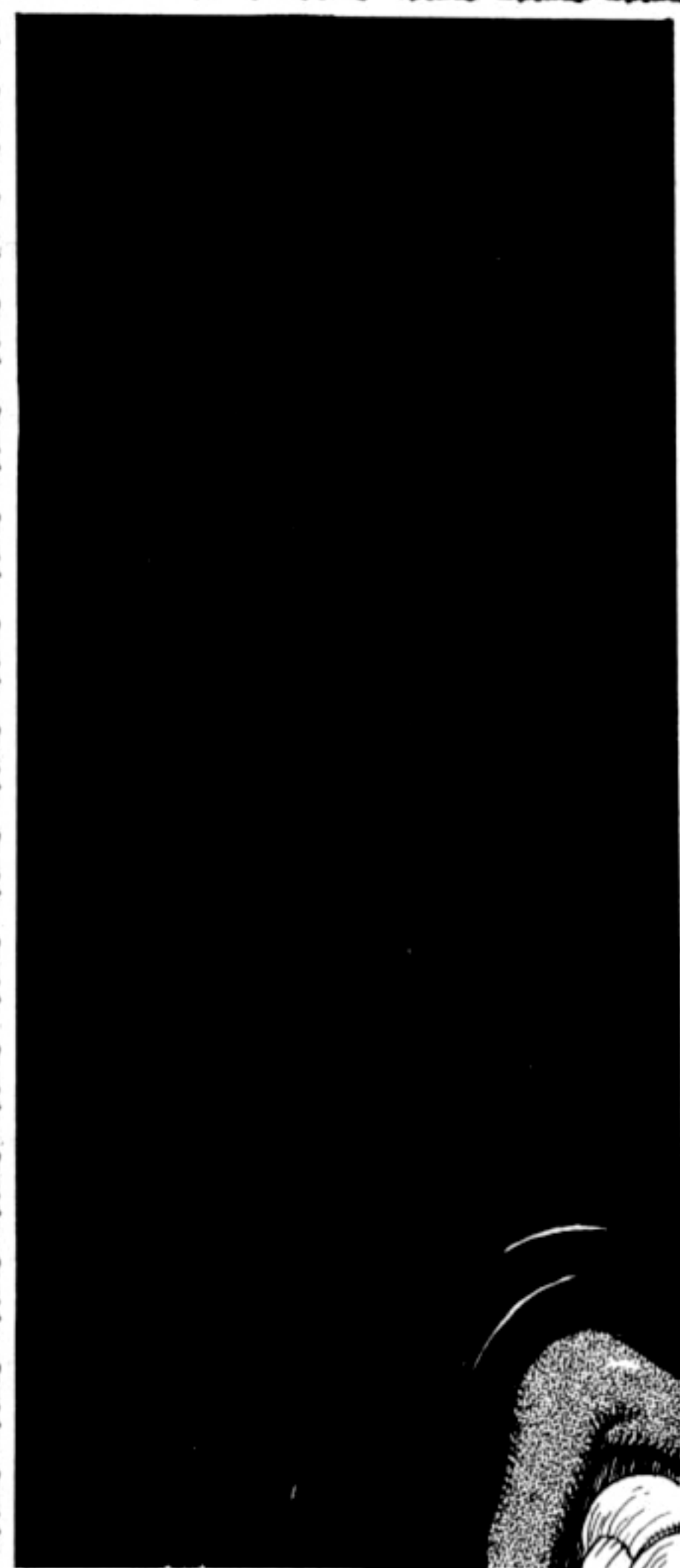
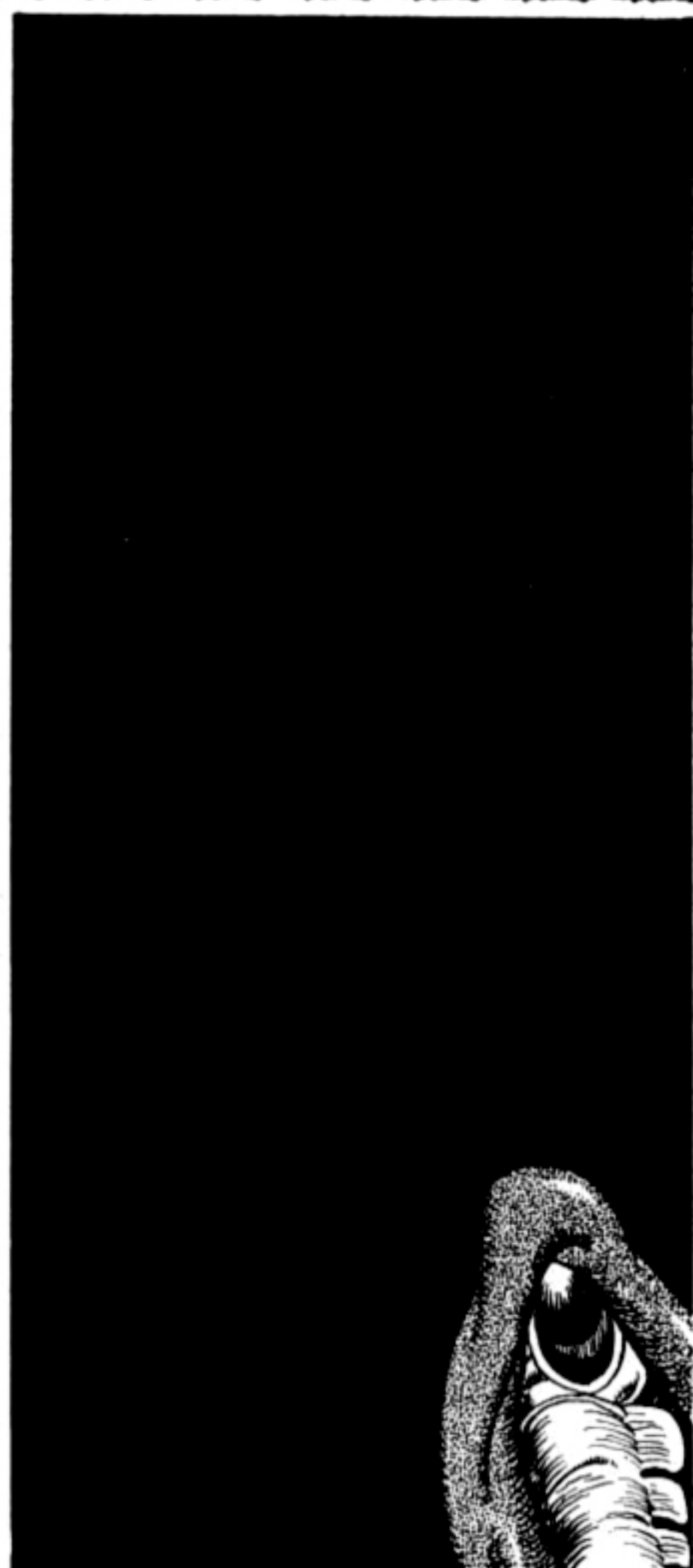
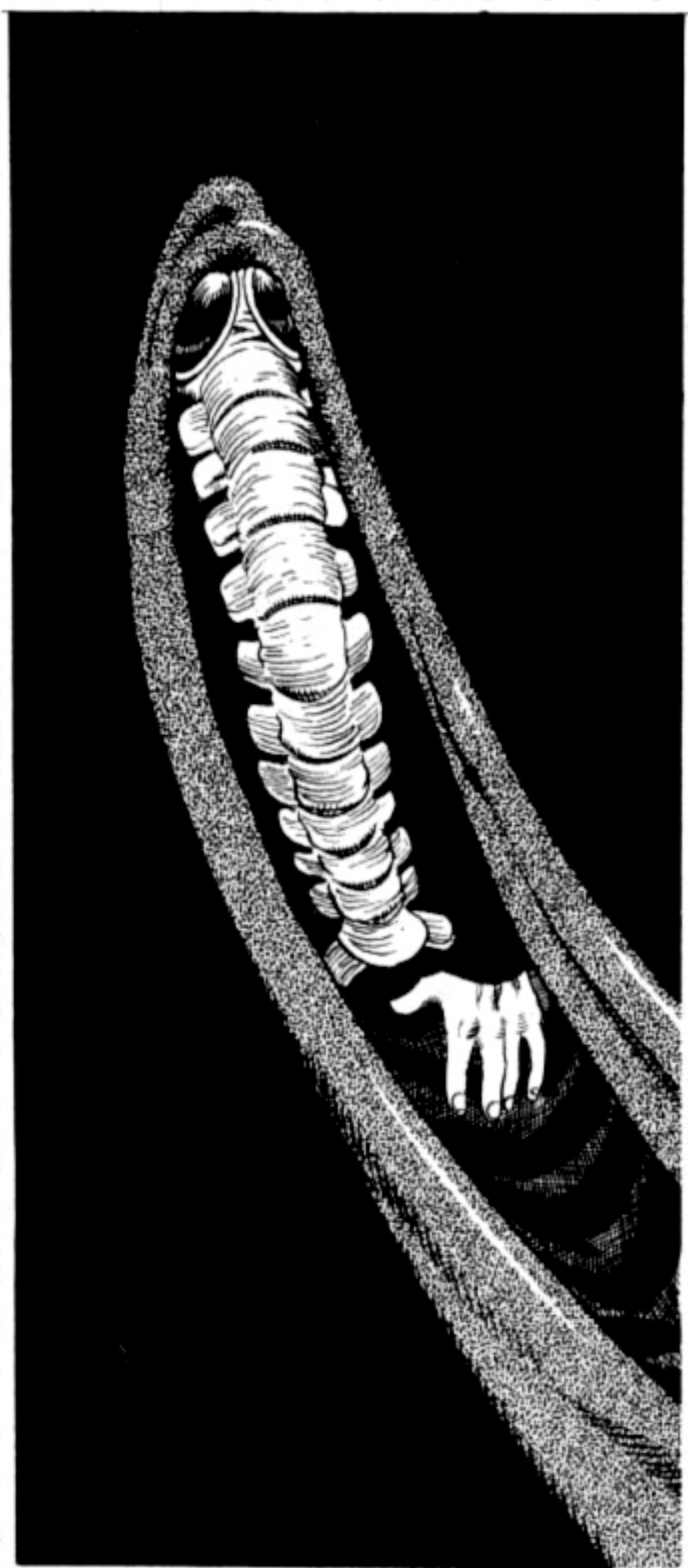
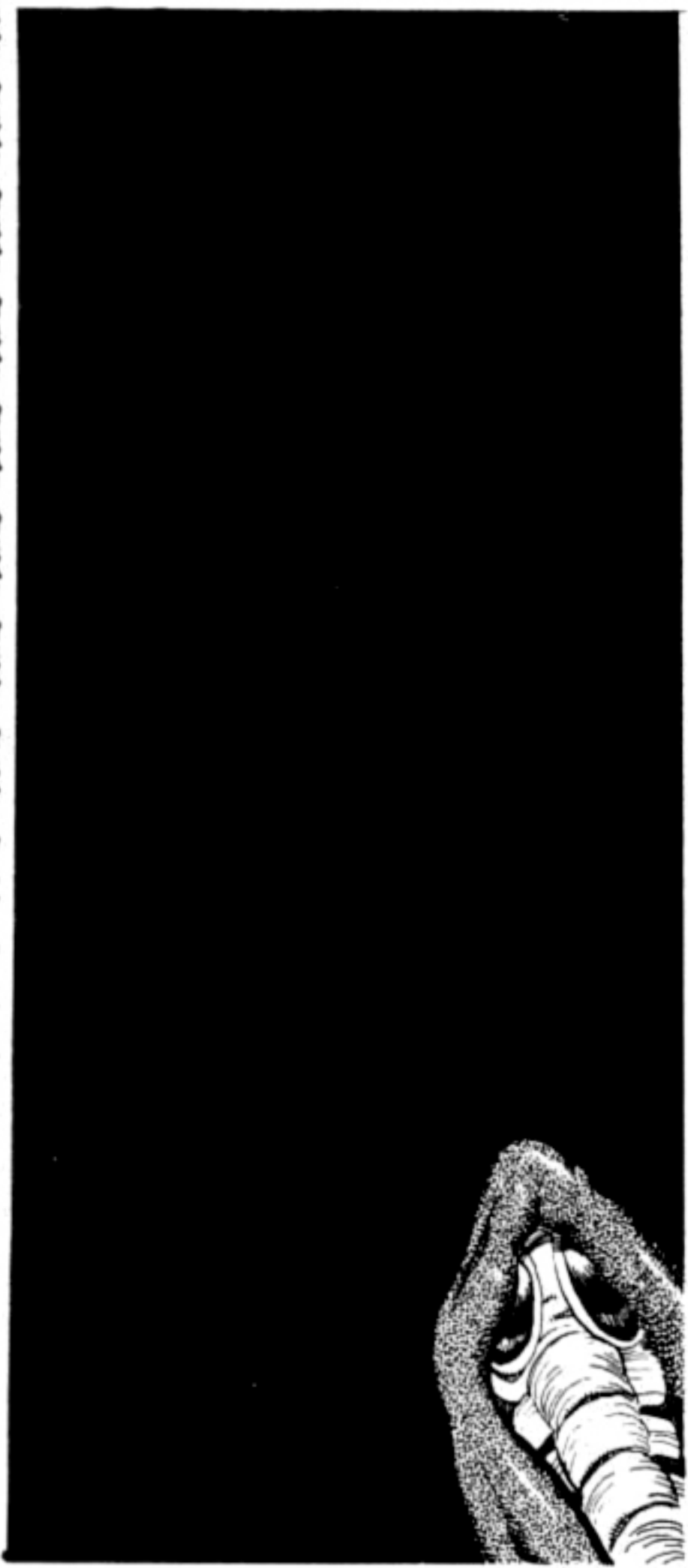
THAT WITHOUT
YOUR INSATIABLE
LUST FOR BLOSSOM
YOU WOULD STILL
BE THE PUNISHER
ROACH...?

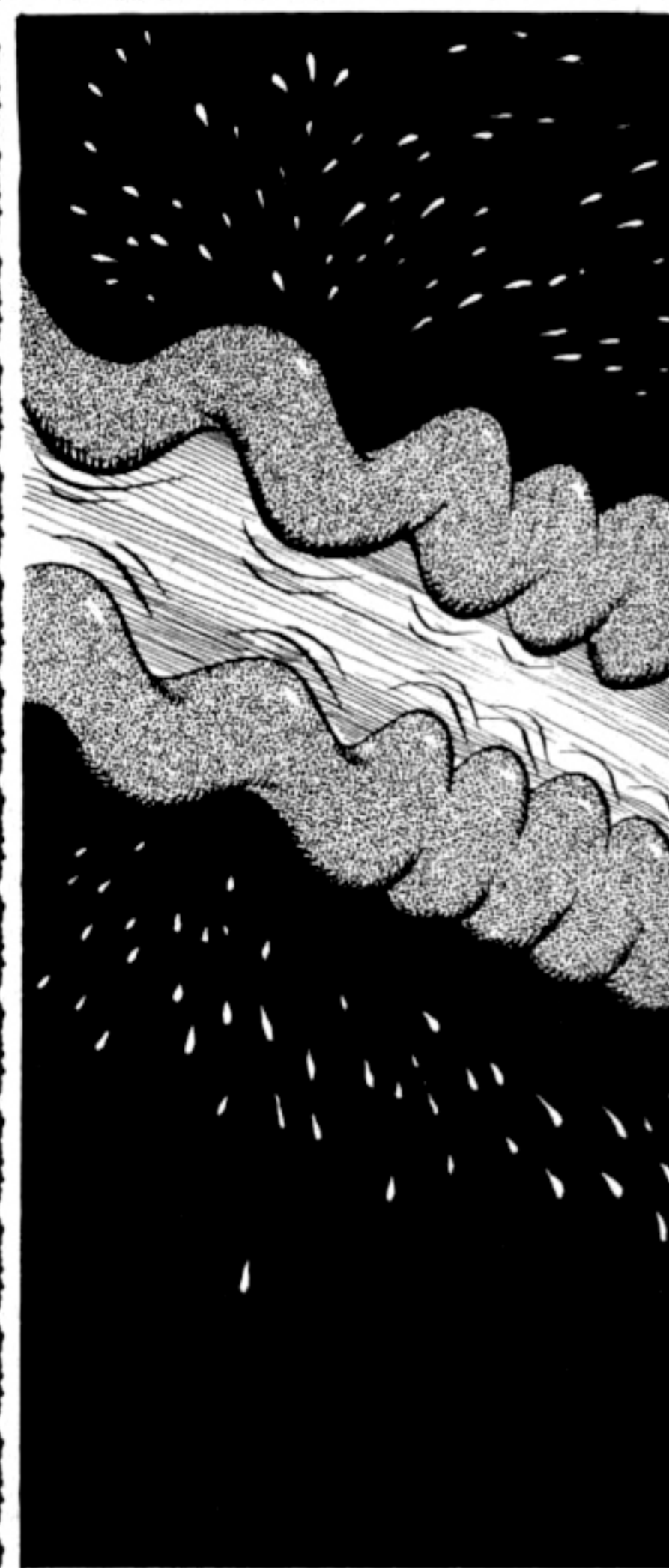
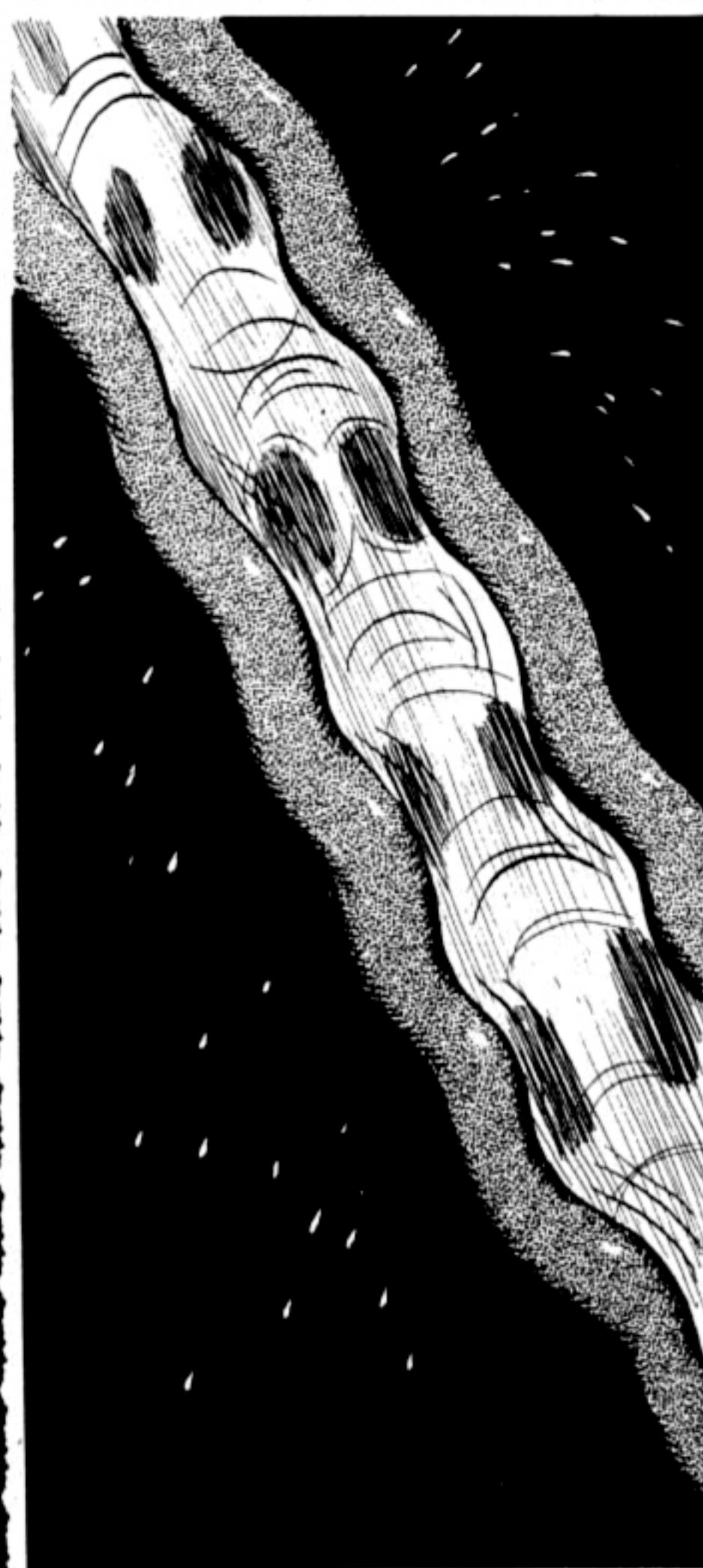
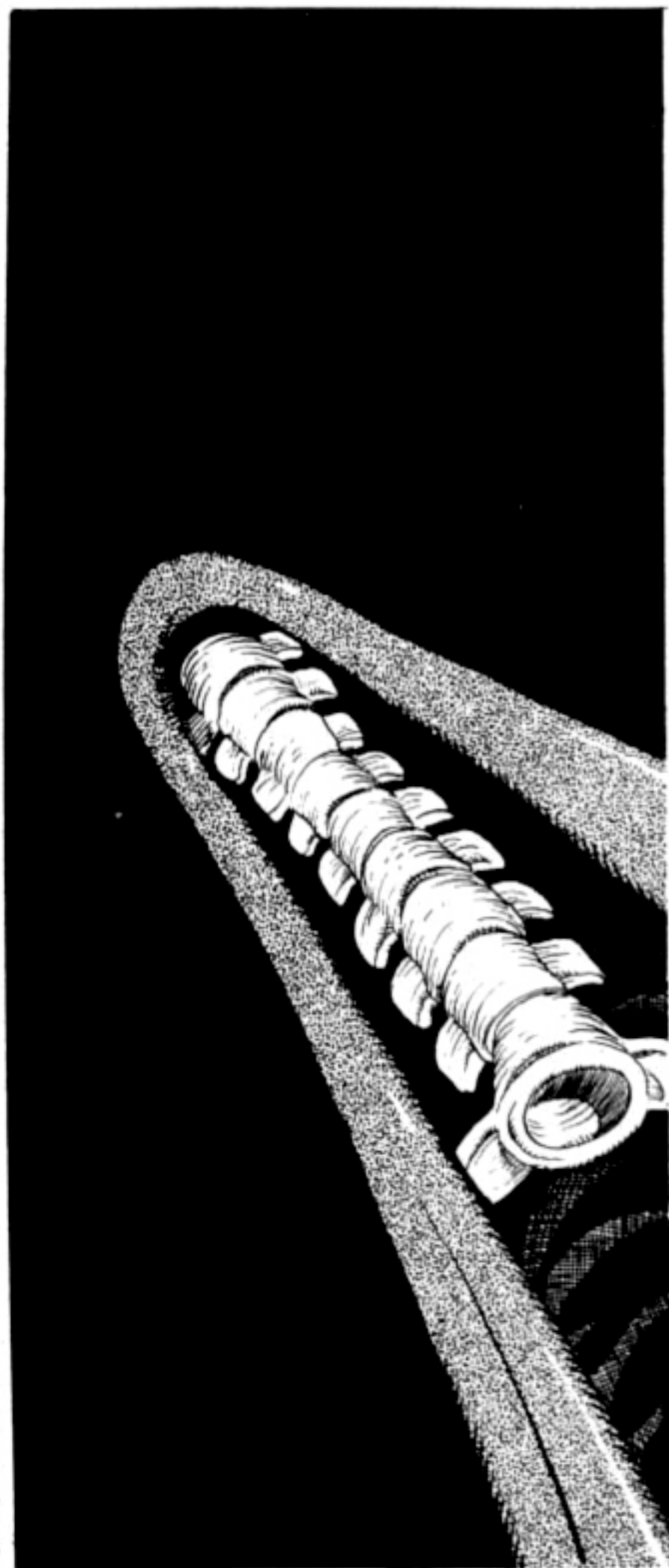
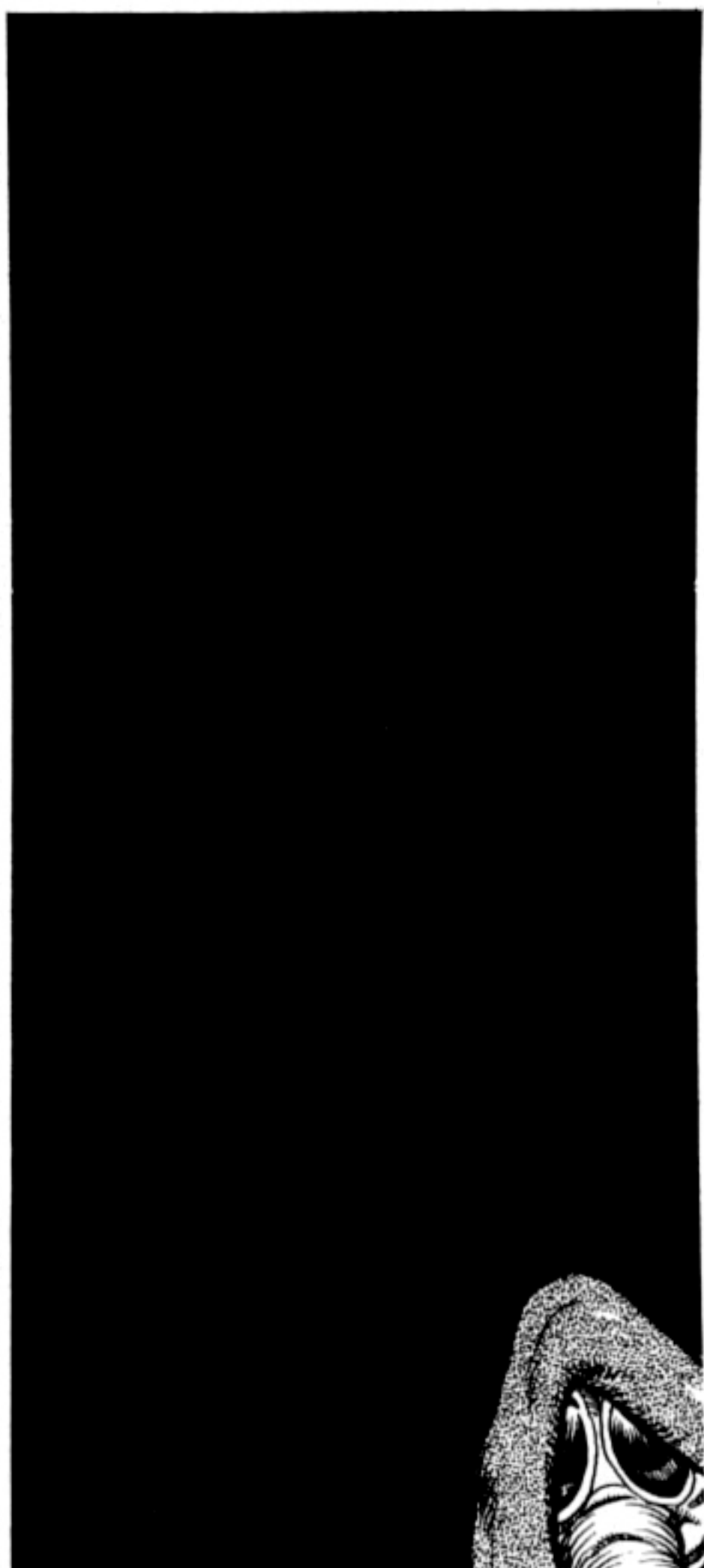
DON'T BE
SHY, LITTLE
BROTHER...

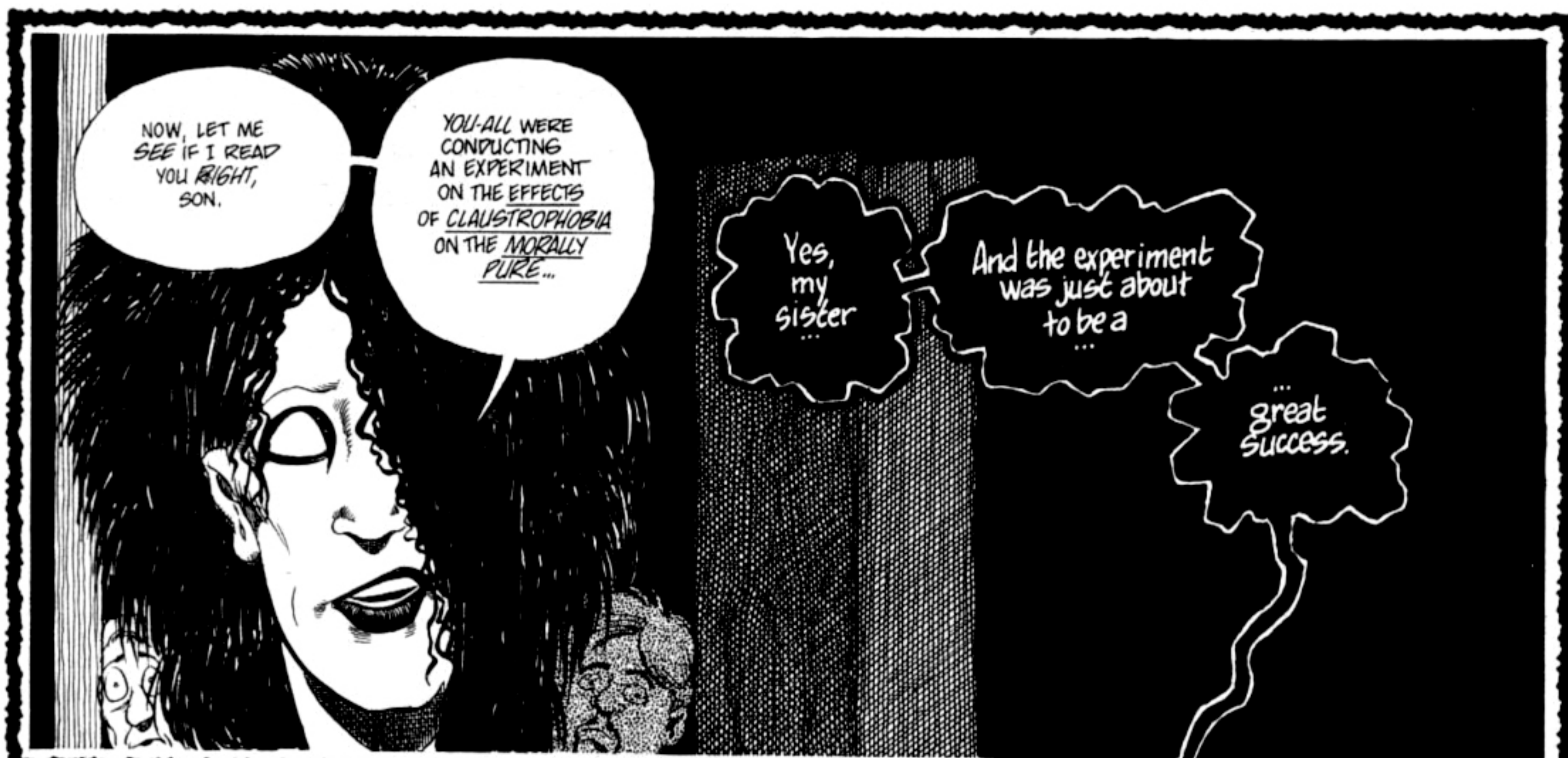
COME.



COME INTO
MY REALM...









Y'KNOW?
CER'BUS
ALLUS
LIKED
YOU... Y'KNOW?

DID YOU
KNOW
THAT?
DID YA?



YAWAN'
SLIM
SCODGE
FRM
CERBUSSES
BUGGID?

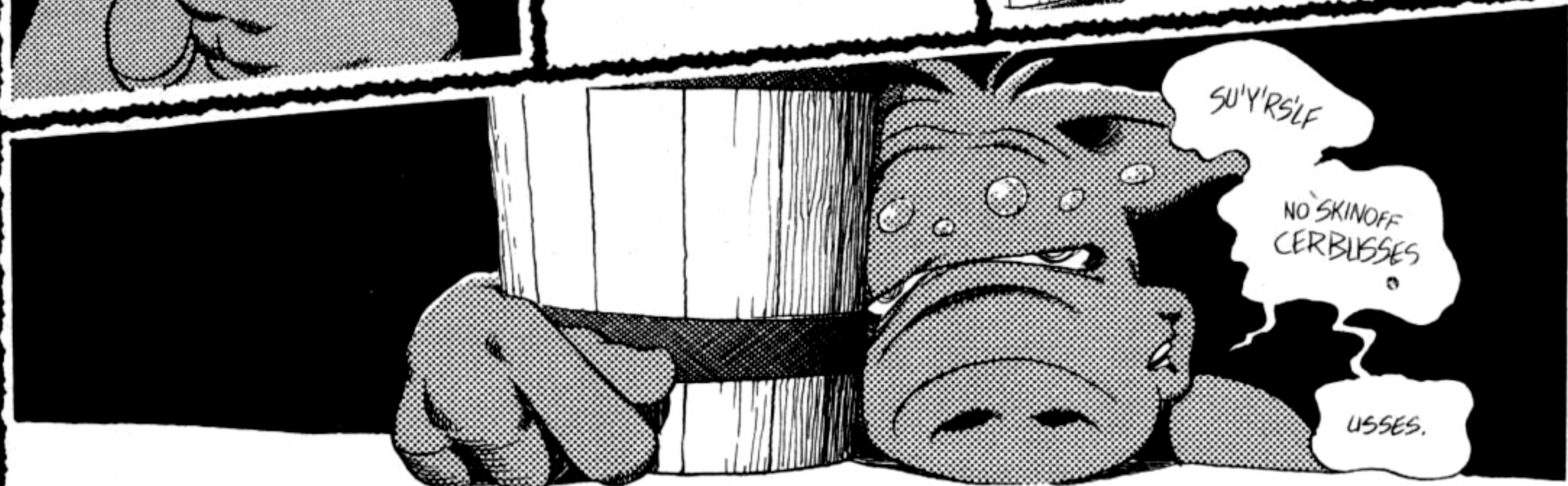
UH, NO
THANKS



G'WAAAN! CERBUSSES
GOT PLENNY--
HAVESM SCODGE
FRM CERBUSSES
BUGGID

NO.

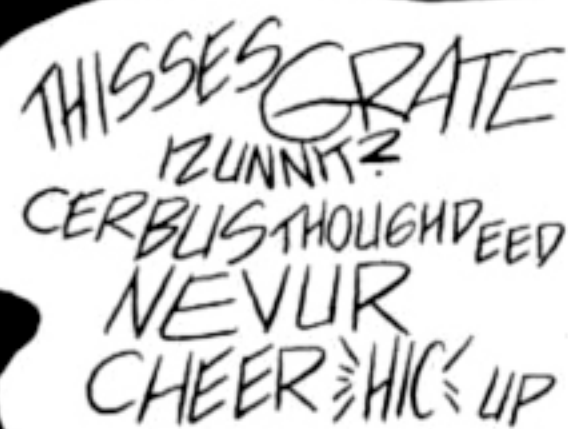
THANKS,
VARMINT.

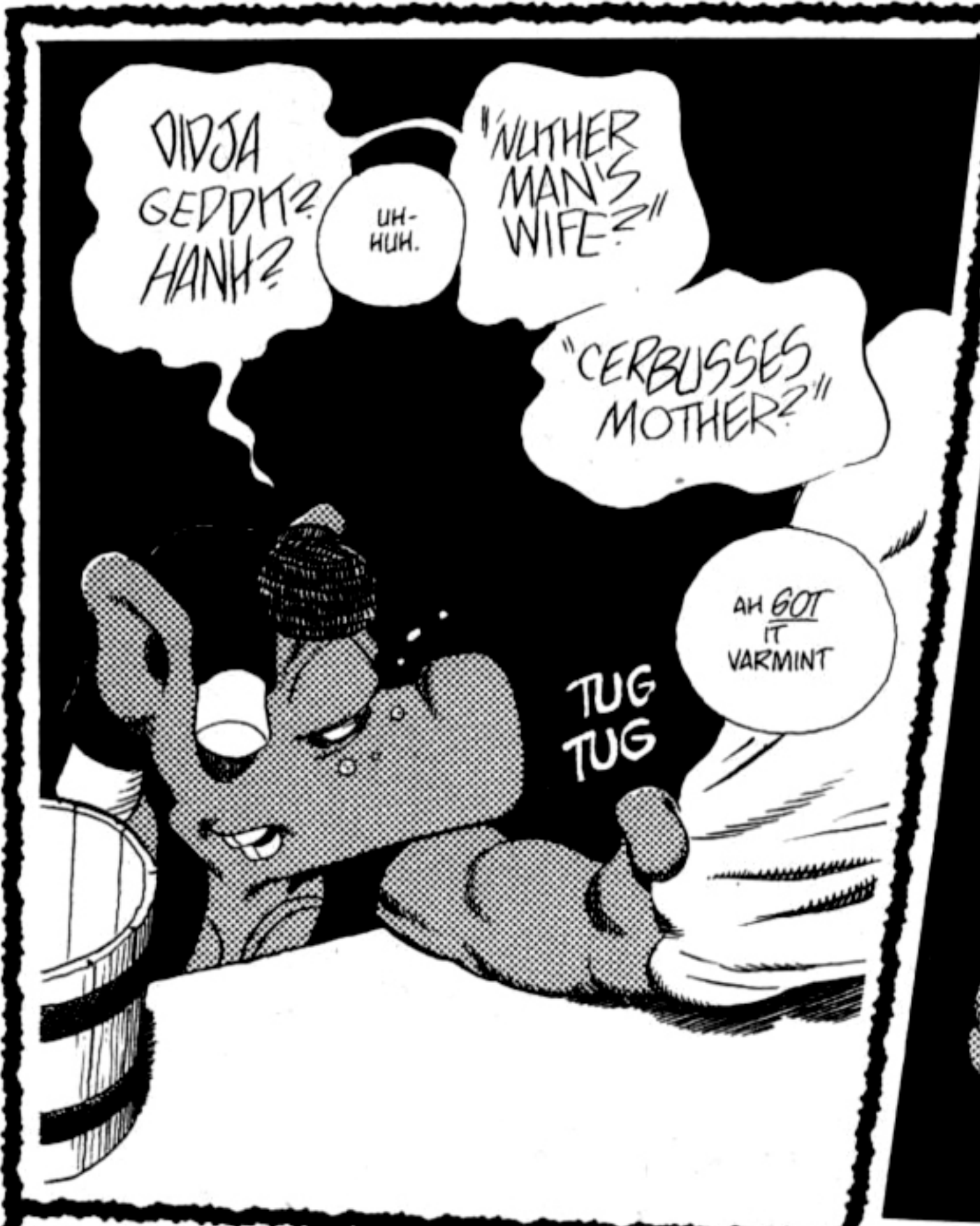


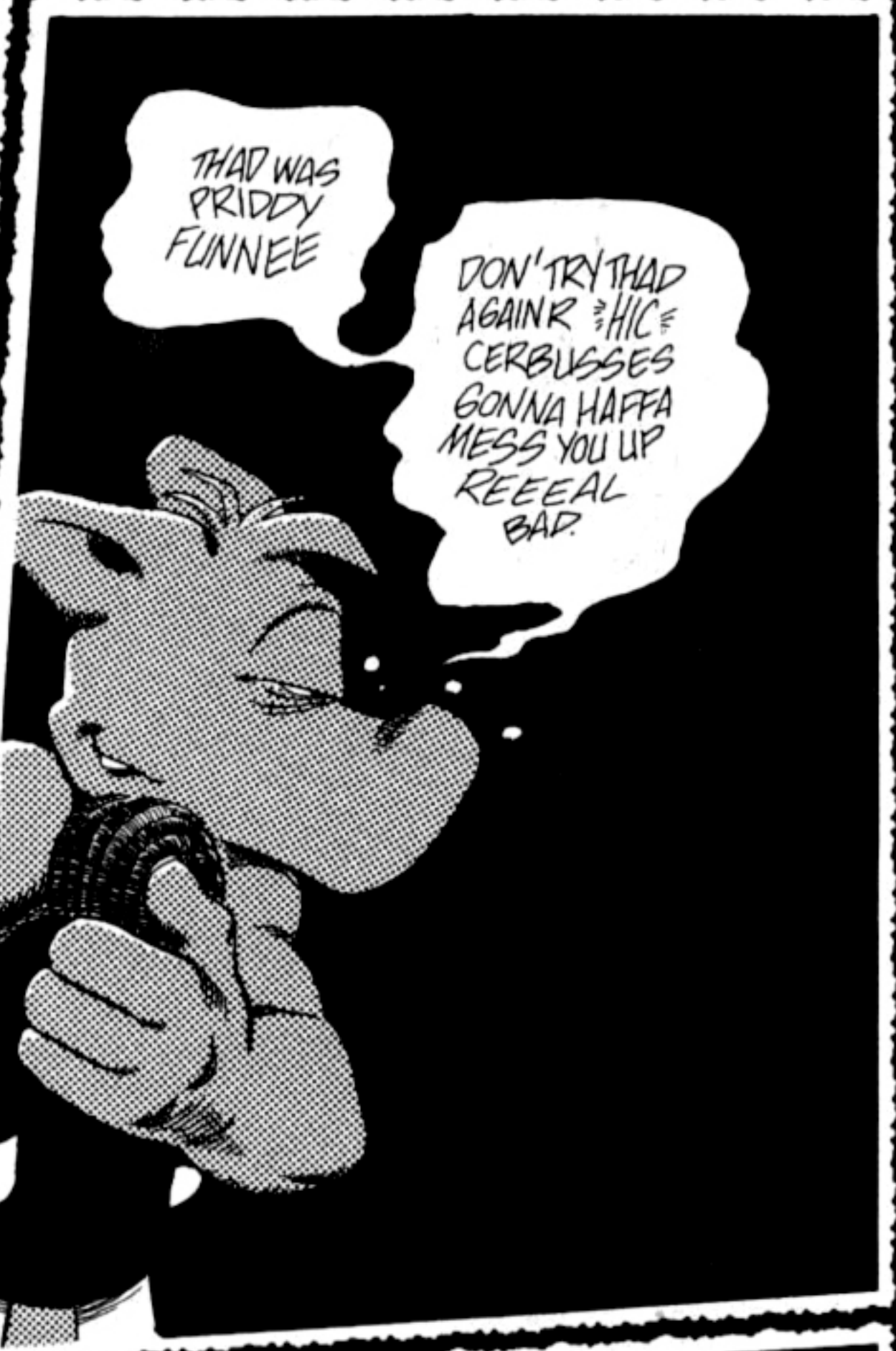
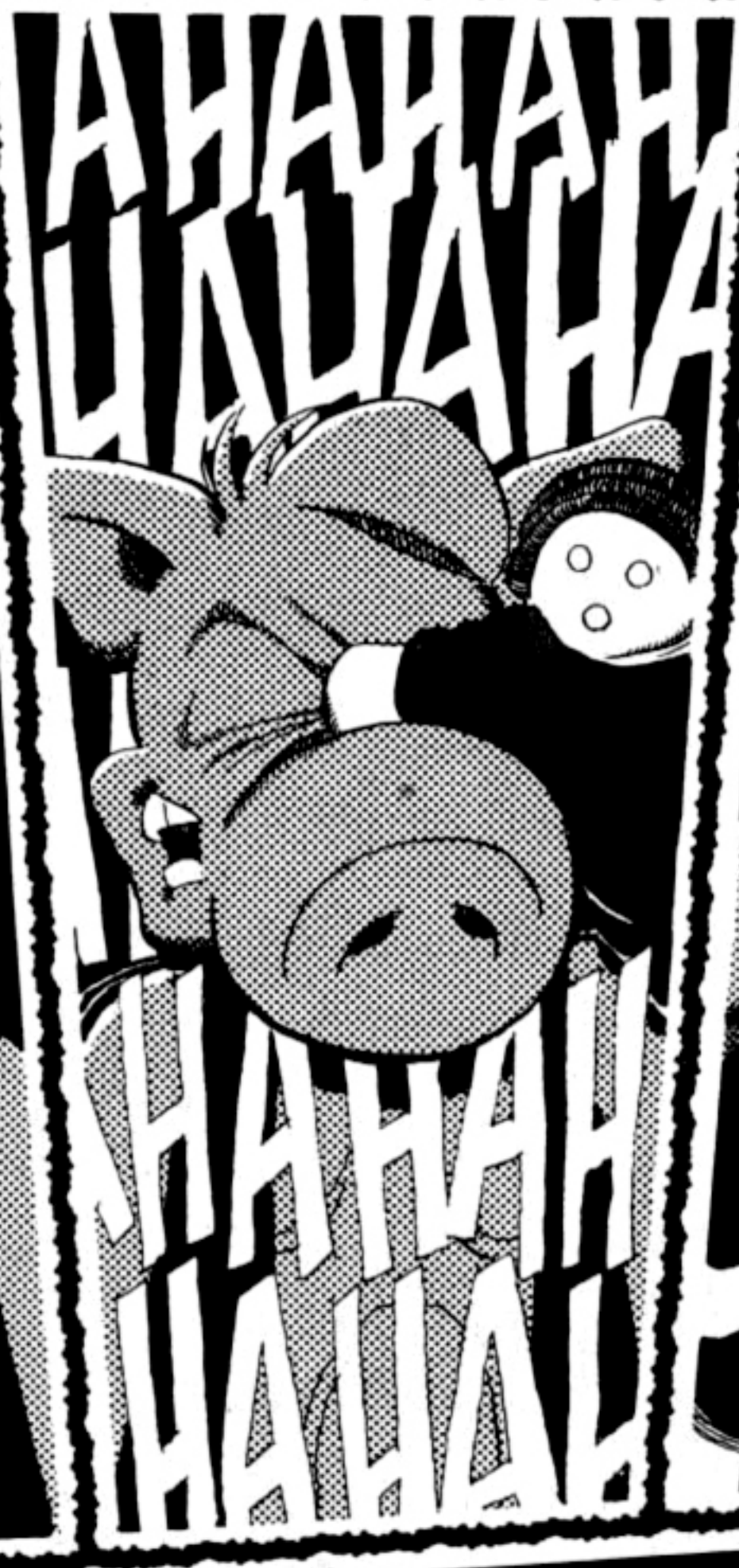
SU'Y'RS'LF

NO SKINOFF
CERBUSSES

USSES.

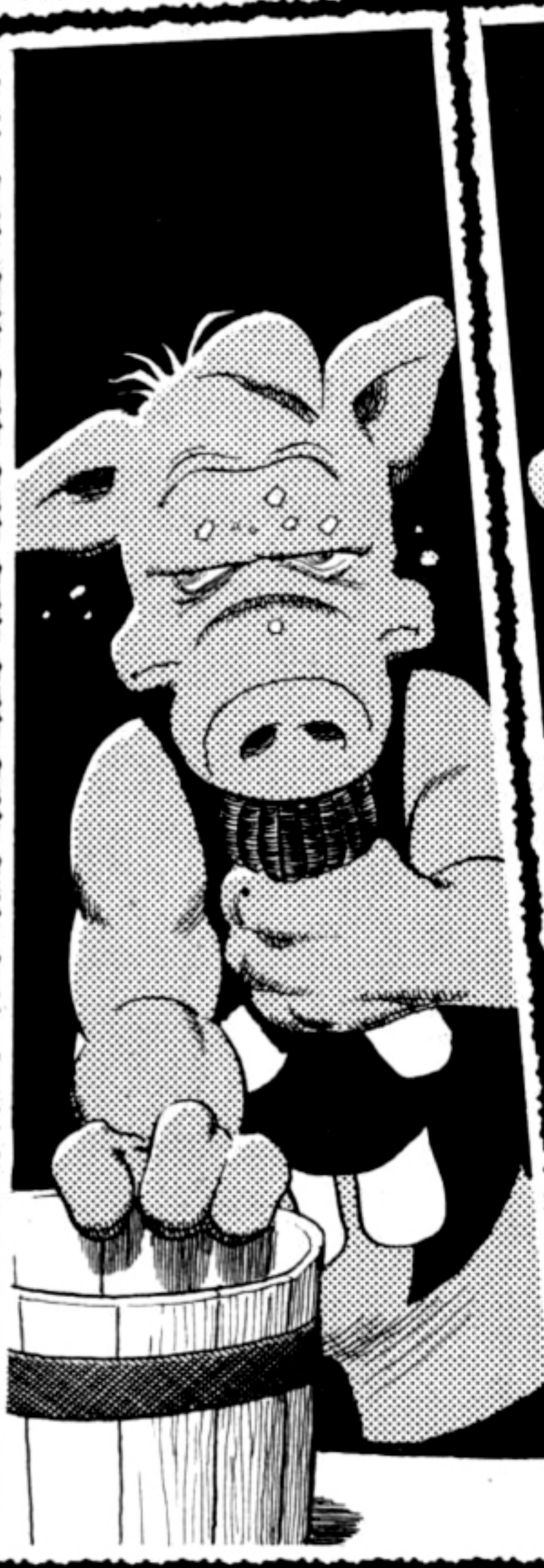






THAD WAS
PRIDDY
FUNNEE

DON'T TRY THAD
AGAINR ^{HIC}
CERBUSSES
GONNA HAPPA
MESS YOU UP
REEEAL
BAD.




SHAY'ZITOKAY
WITHYEW IF
CERBUS FALLS
OVERN PLUKES
NOW?

BE MUH
GUEST.



WHOMP
BOOM



We must be ever-vigilant against sudden and spontaneous outbreaks of sorcery. It is tempting, when events and people begin to rearrange themselves in distinct lines and configurations, to mistake such arrangements for expressions of the will of the Goddess manifesting itself. The very fact of these occurrences dictates a need for extreme caution and strict adherence to the guide-lines of our ancient and revered texts. We must never forget that the Divine Light of the Goddess's Path is often accompanied by the false light of distraction and divergence. Demons and false teachings line the True Path, ready, always, to ensnare the unwary. Birth! Birth above all else. For in childbirth even the most gullible finds the Divine Light of the Goddess to shine most brightly. With the birth of a child, the young mother finds her way in the world and the division between false mysteries and the True Path becomes as sure and as apparent as the difference between night and day. Choose an appropriate mate, choose procreation, choose the path of the True Mother and all becomes clear.

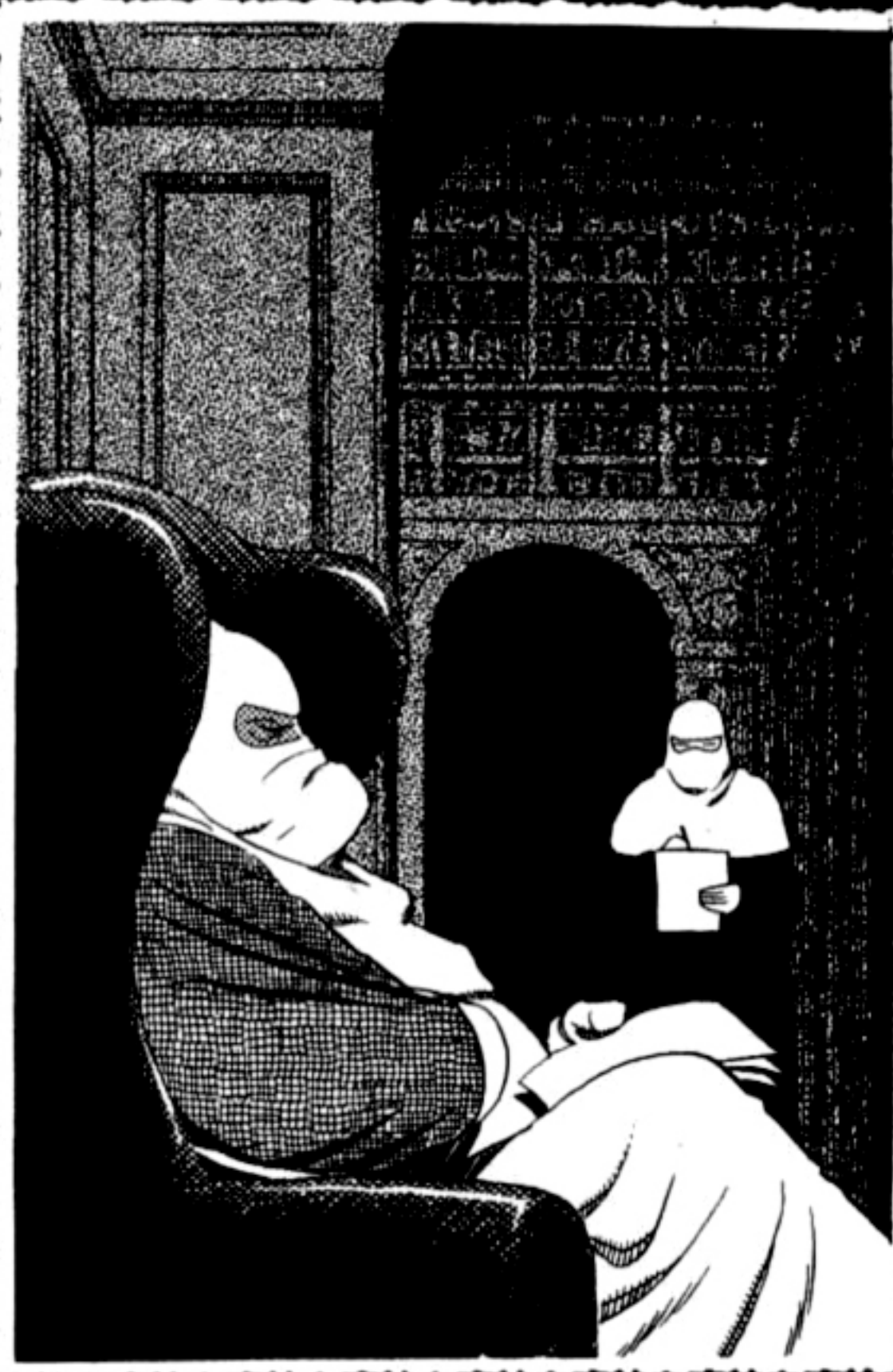
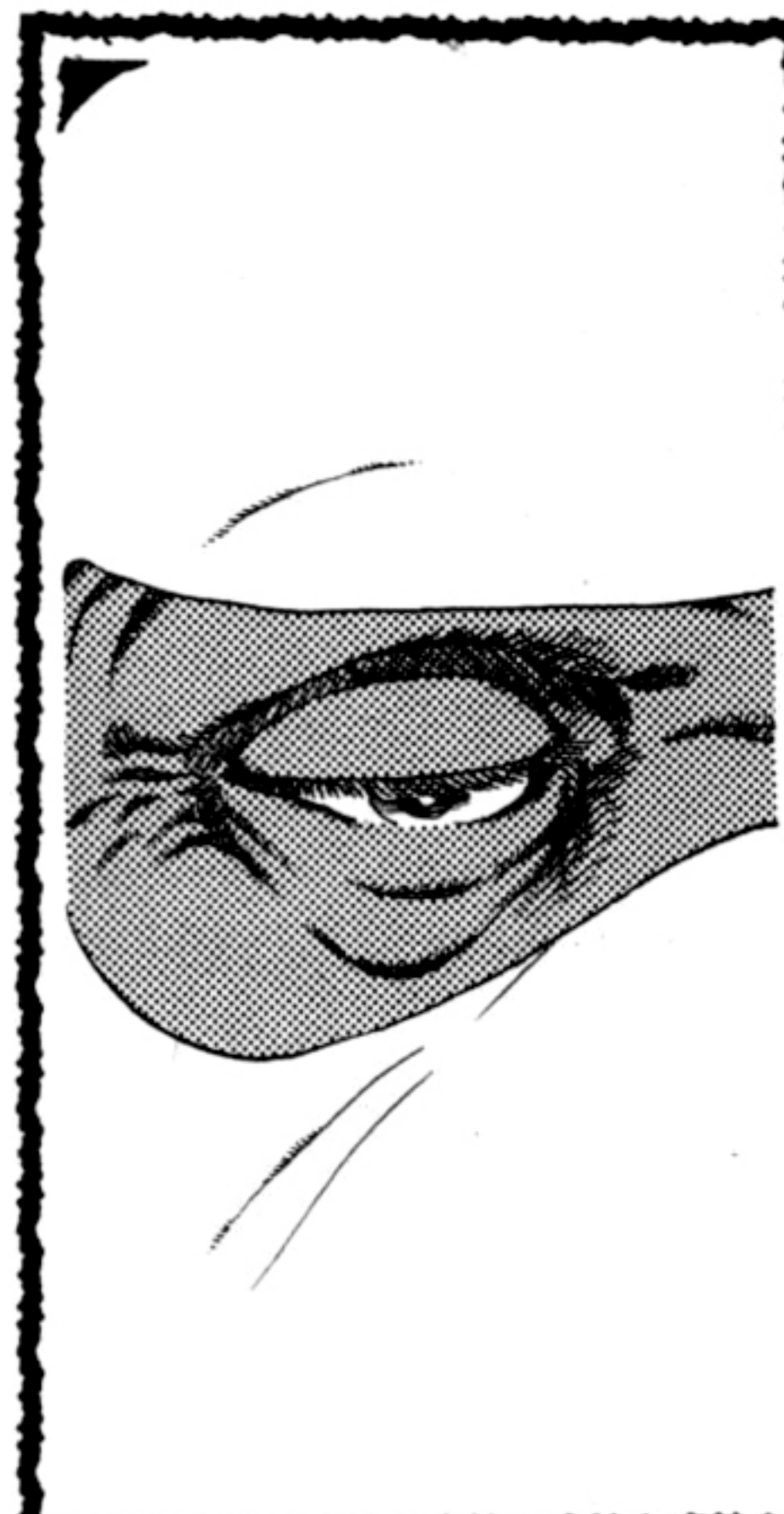
**Cirin
The New Matriarchy**



It is curious to me, in the writings of the Matriarchists, that they allude often to the unseen and unknowable mysteries of female existence; inexplicable and harmonious convergences and coincidences; and yet, at each juncture when they raise the issue, it is dismissed out-of-hand as wicked and false with no explanation of why, exactly, that is the case. Childbirth is the universal panacea. Have a baby and the inexplicable becomes untroublesome and irrelevant. In my efforts to raise and confront these issues, I am faced, often, by malice and indignation; most particularly when I suggest that, far from being a panacea in the area of the inexplicable, childbirth functions as a soporific; deadening natural curiosity and intellectual examination beneath layers of mindless habit, ritual and duty. The effect is not unlike military training, whose sole purpose is to transform the reasoning individual into a mindless drone.

Astoria
Kevillist Origins





Cirin:
I will make this
short and to
the point,
since many
events are
beginning to
converge and
time is of the
essence. I
have just read
the transcript
of our conver-
sation earlier;
just after I
awoke from
my coma. I
was obviously
feverish and I
babbled some
nonsense
about informa-
tion being
kept from
me; which,
of course, we
both know is
not true. It is
the very
essence of our
movement that
all information
is exchanged
freely, that it
is assessed
carefully and
its application
is measured
and just. And
yet, I see here
that you seem
to feel that
I have the
traits of a man.

General Greer:
I...

Cirin:
In my fever, I
said 'Like a
man. Very like
a man.' To
which you
reply, 'I've
thought of
that.' Do you
deny it?

General Greer:
No, Great
Cirin. In the
context of ...
what I thought
you were ...

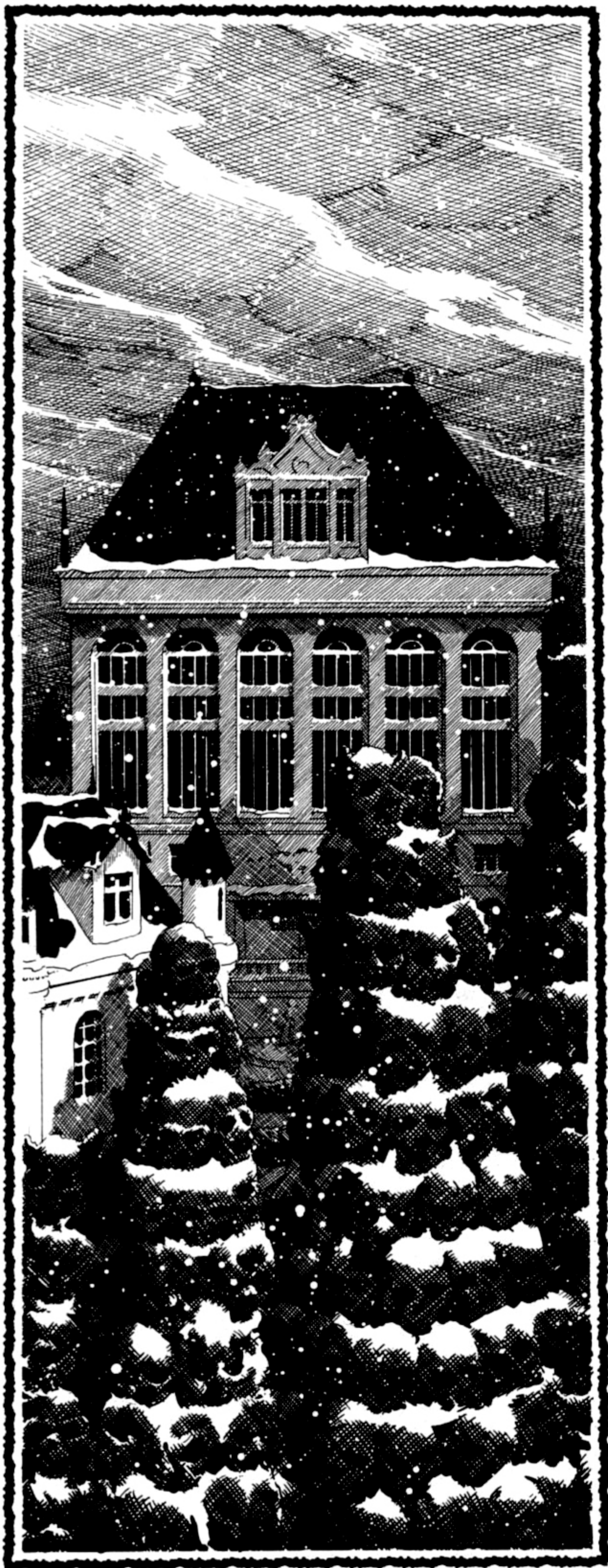
Cirin:
And do you
realize that the
expression of
such a view
represents
an extremely
serious form
of treason
against the
Goddess
herself?

General Greer:
Great Cirin,
in the context
of the conver-
sation ...

Cirin:
Just answer
the question.

General Greer:
I... yes,
Great Cirin.





Cirin:
General
Greer, you
are hereby
found guilty
of high
treason
against the
Goddess and
against the
occupational
government
of Iest. You
are to be
taken from
this place
and executed
within the
hour. May
the Goddess
have mercy
upon your
soul.



EVEN BEFORE HIS HEAD hit the tavern floor, Cerebus was asleep and dreaming. It was odd, though, because he was aware of lying on the tavern floor and aware that he was dreaming at the same time. His hands were gripping a railing of some kind and he was staring out across cloud formations unlike any he had ever seen. They had equal characteristics of clouds and of ocean waves; rising and rolling too slowly to be composed of water, but too quickly and in patterns too regular to be cloud-like. Plying its way through the cloud-waves was an ornate sofa and endtable, beneath a crescent moon ringed by three stars in a cloudless sky. There was a small figure bobbing up and down in the cloud-waves who resembled an insect, shouting for help.

'Help! I'm being held captive in my sister's ...'

The rest of his words were lost in a thunderous rush of cloud-wave and he vanished from view.

At that moment, a figure appeared, perched on the arm of the sofa, drink in hand, clad only in under-garments. Astoria. Cerebus recognized her instantly; and as he gazed at her profile, it was as if he could read her thoughts as she gazed straight ahead at ...



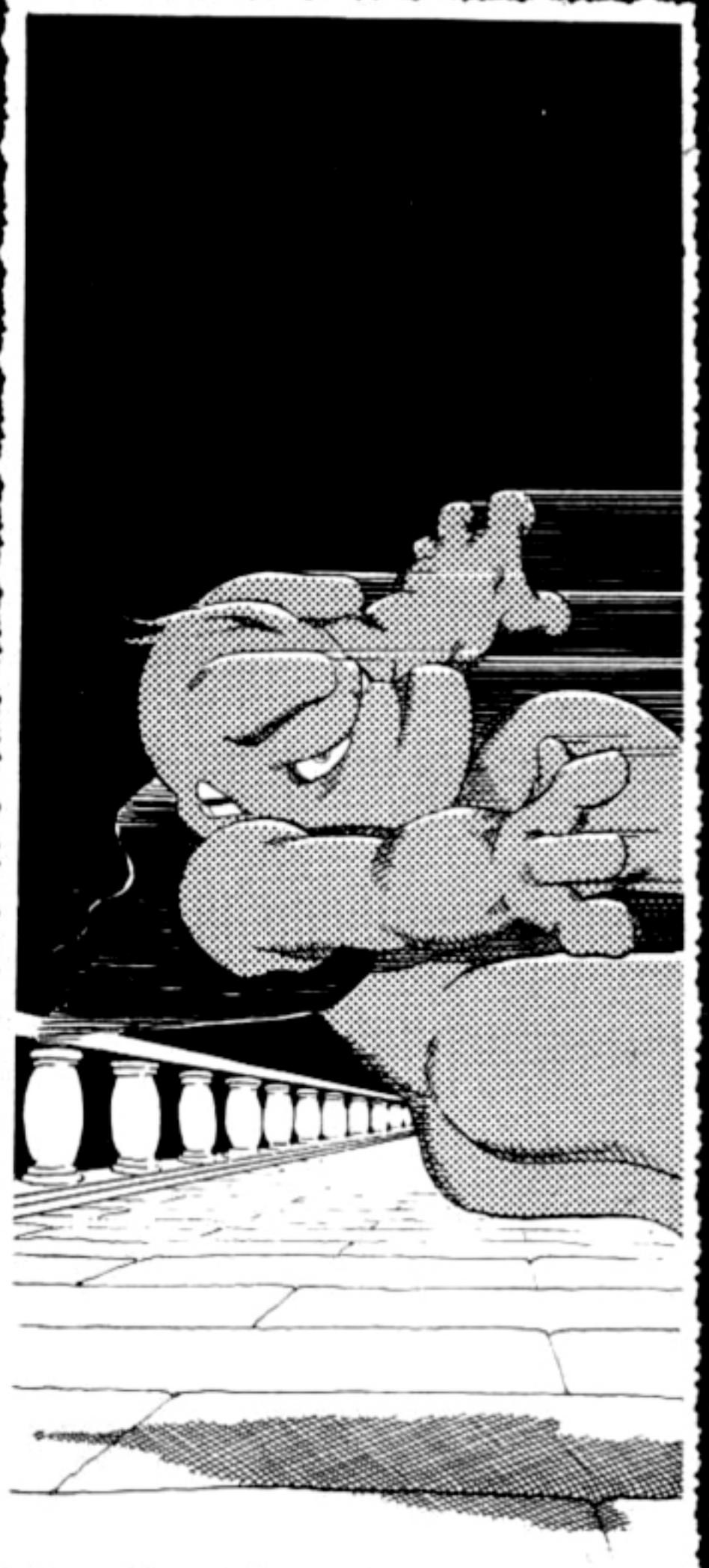
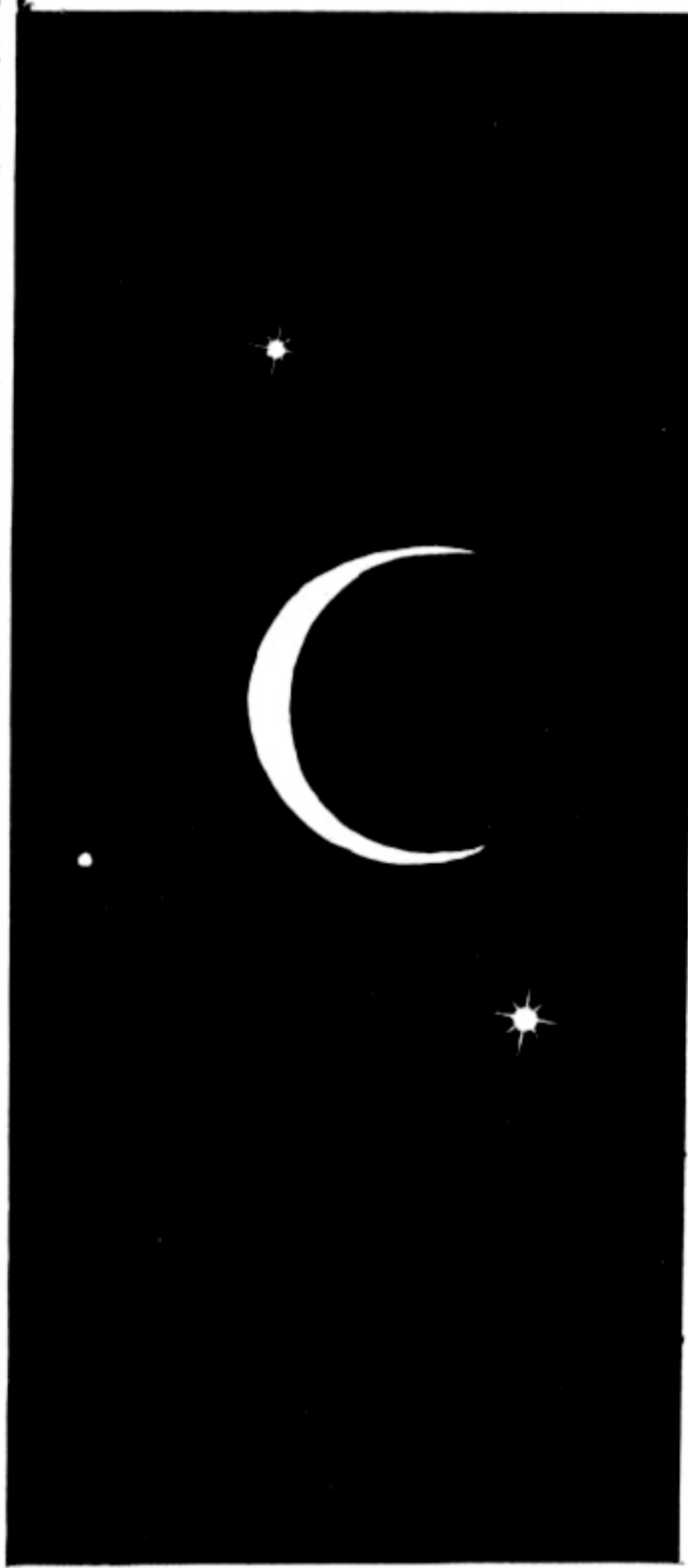
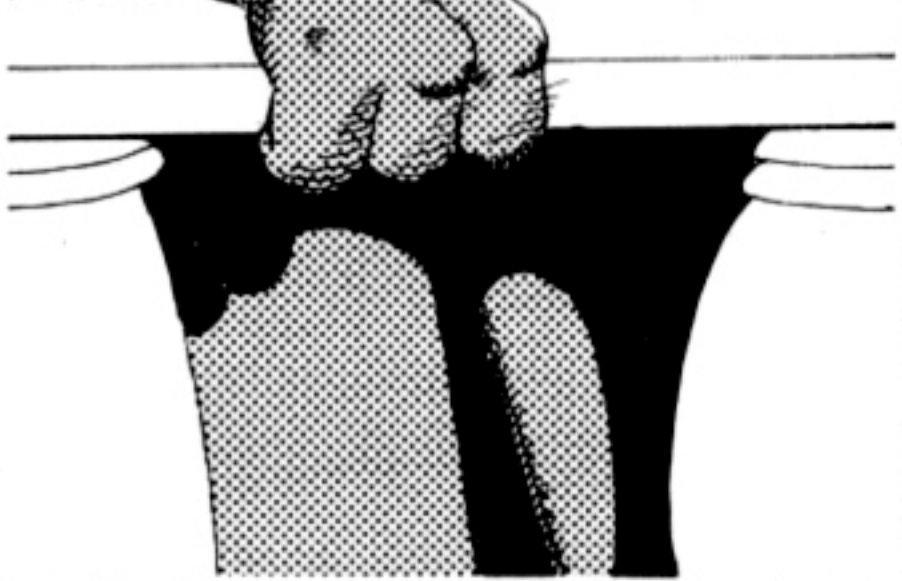
HE CHURCH. SHE'S UP there right now. She severed the link; willfully, without a moment's hesitation or regret. What possibility is there now? All we can do is to act out the same events in the same sequence. What made her this way? How could she see something so clearly; speak the words in rhythm with me; and then turn her back and resume her old ways? Compromise was possible. With both of our minds we could have made it happen. There's every reason to think that we wouldn't even have had to take any action. If we could just let things take their course and resist the urge to destroy each other. But she's the destroyer. Isn't she? I'm the one who's going to be on trial. There's something there. Astoria, old girl. Don't lose it now. She's the destroyer. That's wrong. Even when I thought that, it was as if something was squeezing my heart. We're both destroyers. We both seek destruction.

I seek destruction.

Is that it? No. But it's part of it. And that's the part I can change. If I don't try to bring about her destruction. If I can see where she's right and where I'm wrong. Even without a link between us, I can still change myself and attempt to influence events. My followers. I can feel them peering at me through the lattice-work doors. Their minds filled with questions. Of course, I *am* sitting on the arm of a sofa in my underwear sipping scotch.

Time to get dressed.





I HET
CLINEEN
UP PYUHK
...



ENT SCUDGE
PYUHK ESS
DEE WHURST.

WITH LEEDLE
CHUHNKS OOF
RAW
FOOTAYTOO



THEE SMAYLE
ESS ENOOF
TO...
TO...



HEY,
VARMINT!

YUH SEE
THIS HERE
LEMON?



CHOMP
SPLAT



HCK



HCK
HCK



HEH. HEH. HEH.
AH JEST
LOOOVE
A GOOD
PRACTICAL
JOKE...



I HET
CLINEEN
UP PYUHK

I HET
PYUHKKEEN

ENT I HET
PRACTICALLY
JUCKS



After fuming about his know-it-all wise-guy evil twin for some time and puzzling over the inexplicable transformation of his appearance, George (I am not the Judge) at last began to feel a strange and unprecedented calm descend upon him. His gaze rose above the Moon's horizon just as the Sun slipped from view and the stars began to shine in the night sky. For the first time in the uncounted centuries of his observation, he could see, and what was more, understand. His lips parted slightly and he stood there through the long night witnessing and understanding. 'I was wrong,' he thought, more than once. 'I was wrong.' The colour drained gradually from his face and as the sun rose once more, behind him, he felt a single tear form in his right eye. 'I'm sorry', he said then. 'I'm so sorry.'

DADDY?

DADDY-- I'VE
BEEN THINKING

ELF..

CEREBUS
ALREADY TOLD
YOU... CEREBUS
IS NOT YOUR
DADDY

I DON'T REALLY
LIKE ANY OF THE
OTHER SUITES AT
THE REGENCY...

I MEAN, ALL OF
THE BIG SUITES
ARE TOO COLD
AND DRAUGHTY...

AND ALL THE
SMALL SUITES
DON'T HAVE ENOUGH
FLYING ROOM...

PLEASE
...
JUST LET
CEREBUS
PASS OUT
...
OKAY?

YOU ALREADY
DID PASS OUT,
DOPEY...

OH

AND I KNOW YOU
DON'T WANT TO
SPEND THE REST
OF YOUR LIFE DRINKING
AND BARFING...

OH.

UH?

HMM.

SO I THOUGHT
WHY DON'T YOU
BUY US A BIG
HOUSE TO LIVE
IN...?

I COULD
HAVE MY
OWN ROOM
...

AND THEN I
COULD FIND A
MOM-- A REAL
MOM AND YOU
COULD FALL IN
LOVE WITH HER
AND MARRY
HER...

AND A BIG
KITCHEN!

AND
SWANS

AND A BIG
PICTURE
WINDOW
THE SWANS
CAN LOOK
OUT OF!

UH-HUH! AND A BIG
FLOWER GARDEN
AN' SQUIRRELS
AN' DAFFODILS
AN' A FIRE-
PLACE AN' A
NURSERY AN'
EVERYTHING

OUT
OF?

ISN'T
THAT A
GREAT
PLAN?!

WELL
FIRST OF
ALL CEREBUS
DOESN'T
HAVE ANY
MONEY...

AND SECOND
OF ALL, IF
CEREBUS TRIES
TO LEAVE THIS
TAVERN CEREBUS
WILL BE ARRESTED
AND EXECUTED
...

OH,
DARN.

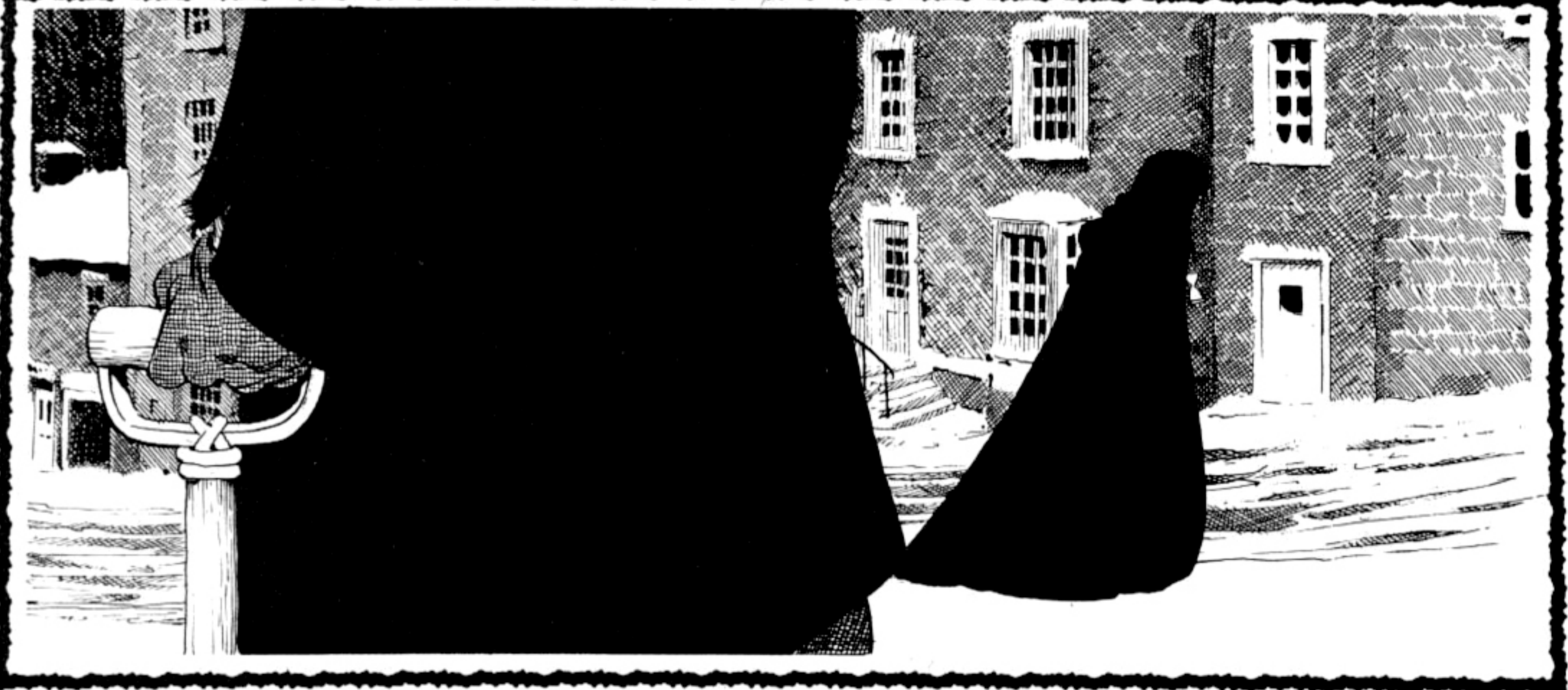
THAT'S
RIGHT
...

DON'T GO
AWAY!

POIT!

GO
AWAY!

ELF... IT
TAKES
CEREBUS
FIVE MINUTES
JUST TO
BLINK....



Cirin:
I have reviewed the transcripts from our people keeping Cerebus under observation in the Lower City; most particularly the time immediately prior to and immediately subsequent to the collapsing of the mountain on the Regency Hotel.

General Steinem:
Yes, Great Cirin?

Cirin:
I want them all recalled to duty here in the Upper City and replaced. Immediately. They've either lost their minds or, more likely, they are Illusionist infiltrators. Have you read the transcripts?

General Steinem:
No, Great Cirin. So much has been going on, I . . .

Cirin:
I'll have a set sent to your quarters. They observed him going onto the roof and raising his sword; that's all. And yet, to a one, they attributed that simple act to the completely unrelated geological shifting and collapse of the mountain.

General Steinem:
Mm. I see what you mean. Is it possible that the Illusionists themselves, by some means of mesmerization or . . .

Cirin:
I thought of that. It seems more likely that someone with a vested interest in Cerebus being something more than a mishappen little drunkard infiltrated. That's why I want all of them recalled. And make sure they're all replaced by second and third generation Upper Feldans; no lestans.

General Steinem:
Yes, Great Cirin.



WE GOT TO
BE **POPE!**
WE HAD A
ROOMFUL
OF **GOLD!**
WHAT
HAPPENED!?

IT'S A
LONG
STORY...

HOW
STUPID
CAN WE
BE?!

PRIME
MINISTER!
POPE!... A
ROOMFUL
OF **GOLD!**

AND WE END
UP LYING IN OUR
OWN **PUKE** IN
SOME SMELLY
OLD **TAVERN?**

YOU'RE
YOUNG.

SOMEDAY

WHEN
YOU'RE
...
OLDER

YOU'LL
UNDERSTAND.

WHAT
ABOUT
OUR
MUM?

IS **SHE** OLD
ENOUGH TO
UNDERSTAND?


HELLO,
DEAR.

ARE YOU QUITE
PROUD OF YOUR
SELF, THEN?

HELLO,
MUM.

NO,
MUM.





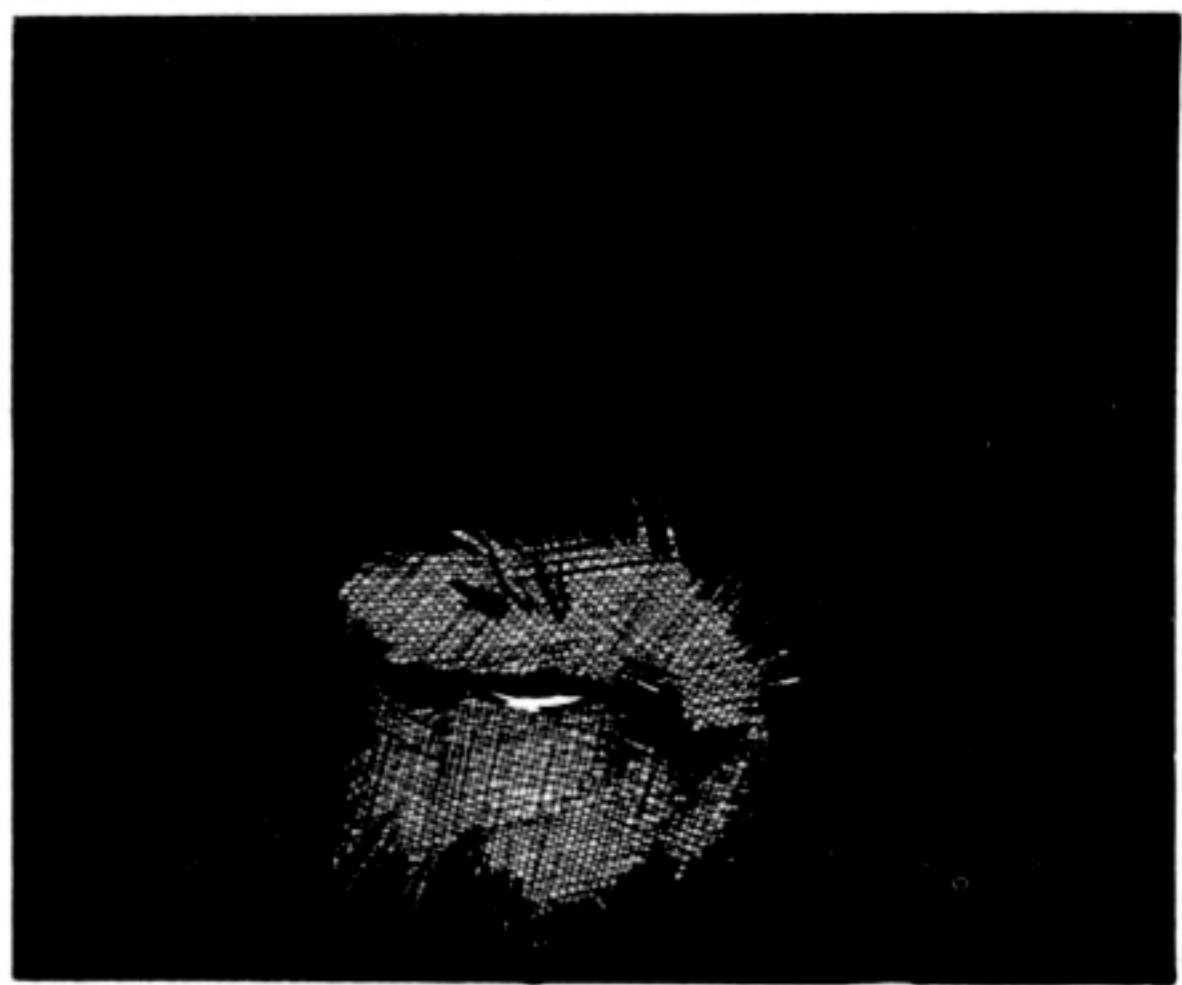
What troubles me most of all is that Cerebus has some hidden nature that I am unable to detect; some manner or quality that Astoria has discovered and which she is able to direct and control. If that is the case, it is clear that the control is limited; while she was able to get him installed as Prime Minister, it is quite unclear if that was only possible through political influence and the poisonous presence of the Kevillists both within the Church and the Government of Iest (as well as her obvious ties to Lord Julius, Weisshaupt and others) or if there is more there than meets the eye. If he is some kind of sorcerous familiar there can be no doubt that his potential for destruction, in proximity to her, is great indeed. Whether political or sorcerous power, it dissipates quickly and abruptly particularly when his position seems the most secure and unassailable. What did happen at the conclusion of Astoria's trial? Where did he go? And how did he return without being detected? I become more convinced that if I ask Astoria these questions directly, whether her answer is the truth or a lie, her answer will at last rid me of my lingering doubts about the little wretch.

Cirin
Private Journal entry
Autumn 1415



If the old battle-axe ever finds out what a useless, foul-smelling, dim-witted little toss-pot I've tied my fortunes to (may the Goddess have mercy on me) she wouldn't stop laughing for a fortnight. Julius planned this all along just to make me look like an idiot. Damn him.

Astoria
Private Journal entry
Winter 1413



THET JUDGE
FELLER WAS
RIGHT...

YOU'LL NEVER
LIVE T'BE
MY AGE...

AT TH' RATE
YER GOIN',
Y'GOT A YEAR
'R TWO LEFT
TO YUH...

YOU'LL DIE
FACE-DOWN
IN TH' GLITTER

STINKIN'
O' BAD
WHISKEY...

AN' NOBUDDY'LL
CARE.

NOBUDDY...

'CAUSE YUH
WON'T HAVE
NO WIFE...

YUH WON'T
HAVE NO
CHILDERN

YUH WON'T
HAVE NO
GRAND-
CHILDERN
NEITHER

Y'UNNERSTAND
WHUT I'M
SAYIN'?

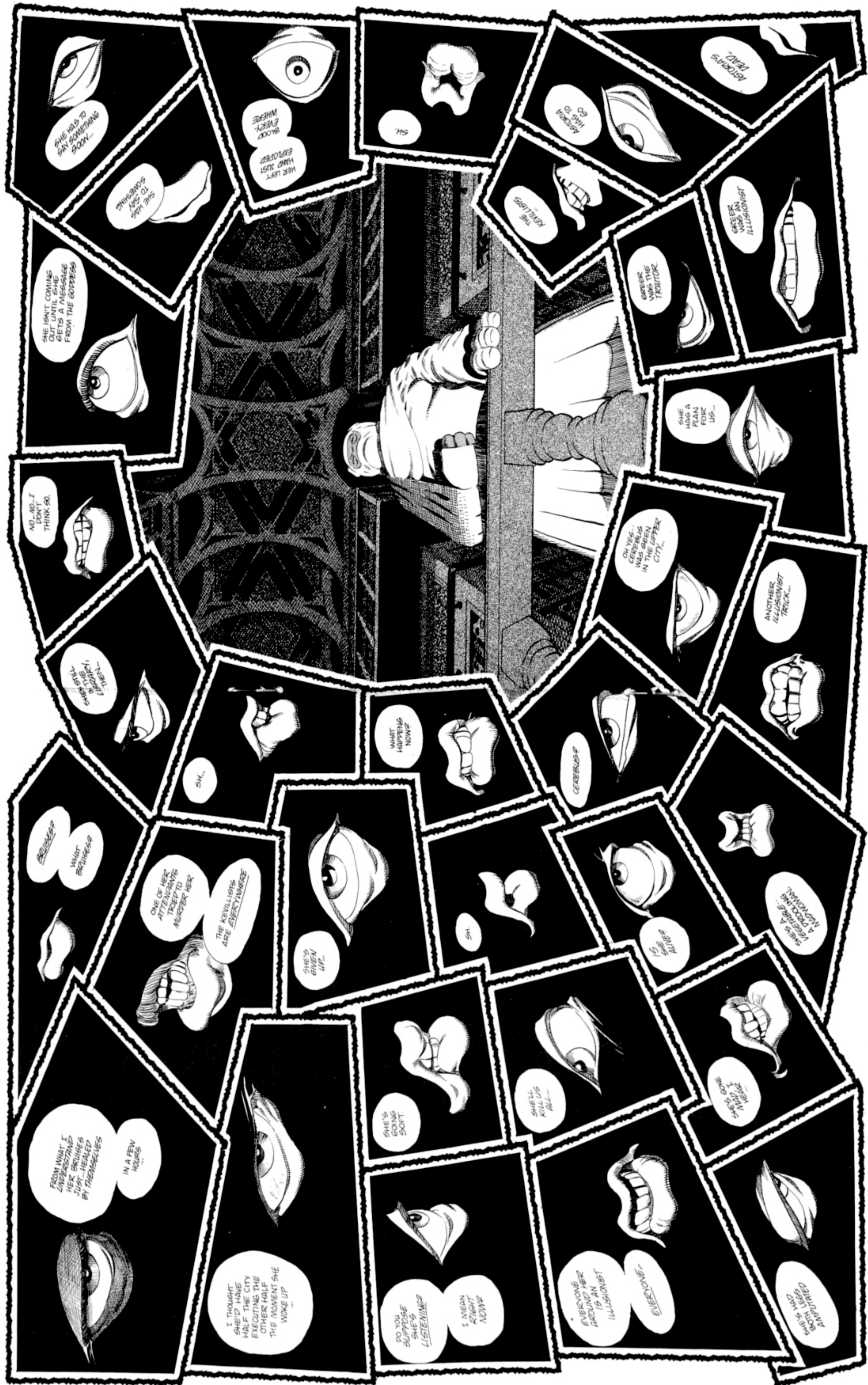
CEREBUS
SHOULD AVOID
BAD WHISKEY

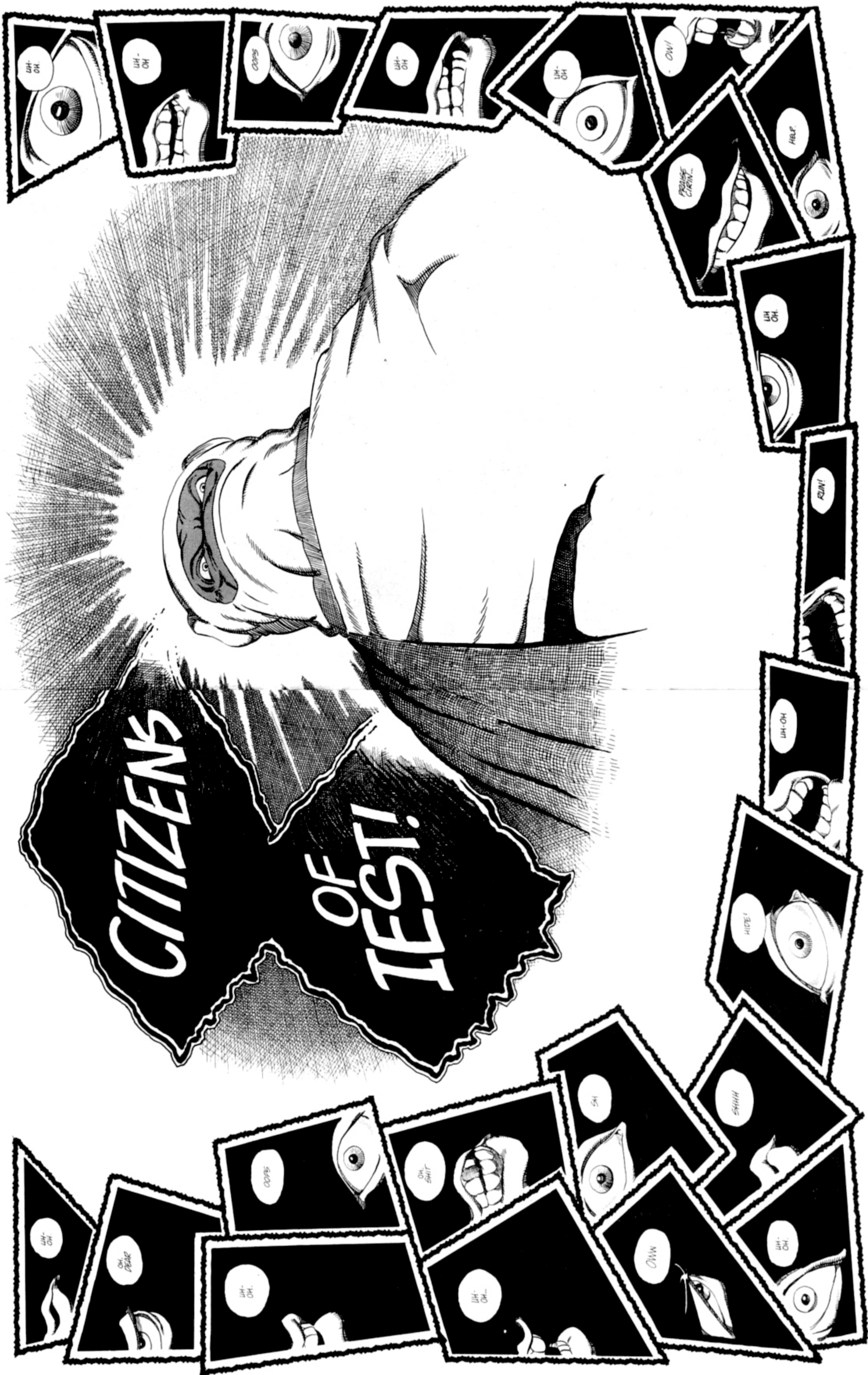
AND STICK
TO PREMIUM
BRANDS

Y'KNOW IF I
REALLY EXISTED
I'D GIVE YOU
SUCH A
SMACK!

NYAH
NYAH









OLCHIE!



UH?



**MAH
HAID!**

OH,
CRAP.



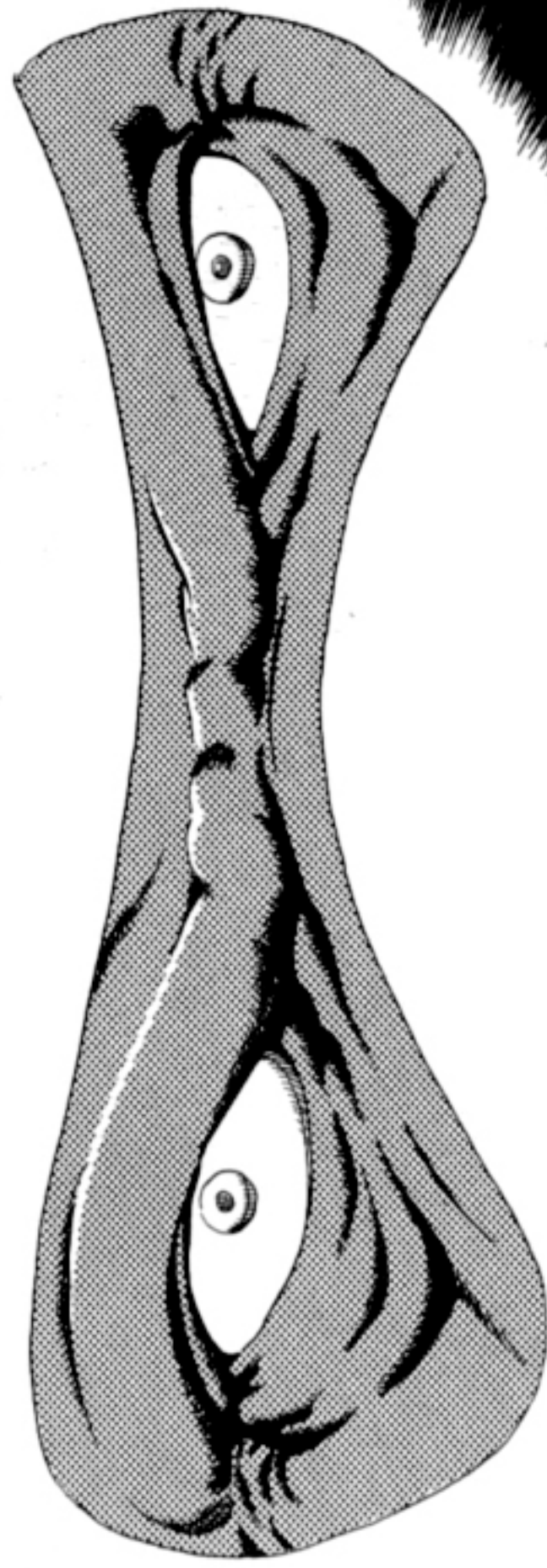
OLCHIE

OLCHIE

NOW
WHAT?



YOU ARE TO BE YOUR
COMMENDED FOR YOUR
LOYALTY: ALL IS WELL! MY INJURIES ARE
MINOR -- ASTORIA! I CALL UPON YOU
AND YOUR FELLOW CONSPIRATORS TO
SURRENDER PEACEFULLY BY
SUNSET TODAY! YOU
CANNOT DEFEY THE LAW
NO HARM WILL COME TO
YOU -- ALL IS WELL!
ALL IS WELL!
ALL IS WELL!





GREAT
ASTORIA?

MM.



THEY'RE
...

THEY'RE
GOING TO
KILL US

AREN'T
THEY.



YES.
THEY
ARE.

DOES
THAT
BOTHER
YOU?



WELL
YES!

I
MEAN.

NO
ONE WANTS
TO DIE.



ON THE
CONTRARY

I'VE BEEN
LOOKING FORWARD
TO MY DEATH SINCE
I WAS EIGHT
YEARS OLD...



BUT -- YOUR
WORK...

YOUR
MOVEMENT.



MOVEMENT?

THIS ISN'T
A MOVEMENT
ANYMORE...

IT'S A
CHARADE

A
FARCE...



I SPENT
YEARS CONSTRUCTING
A CELL SYSTEM
IN THIS CITY

PENETRATING
ALL OF THE
CRUCIAL
DEPARTMENTS
OF THE CHURCH
AND THE
GOVERNMENT
...



I'M BROUGHT,
UNCONSCIOUS,
TO THIS HOTEL
...

AND WHAT
DO YOU DO?

YOU ALL
CONVERGE
HERE--
A FLOCK
OF SITTING
DUCKS
...

SITTING AND
WRINGING
YOUR HANDS
...

FRETTING.

WORRYING.



WAITING FOR ME
TO COME UP WITH
SOME MIRACULOUS
MILITARY PLAN THAT
WILL ALLOW A BUNCH
OF SECRETARIES
AND STENOGRAPHERS
TO DEFEAT SEVERAL
LEGIONS OF TRAINED
MERCENARIES
...



WELL, IT
ISN'T GOING
TO HAPPEN.

WE'RE
GOING
TO DIE.

GET USED
TO IT...

B-BUT
GREAT
ASTORIA...



WHEN HAVE
I EVER ASKED
YOU TO CALL ME
THAT?

YOU JUST
DON'T GET
IT...

ANY OF
YOU



I'M NOT
A DAMN
QUEEN

I'M NOT
A DAMN
GODDESS

I

AM

ASTORIA

PERIOD!



I TRIED TO TEACH
YOU HOW TO LIVE
LIKE HUMAN BEINGS
...STRONG...
INDEPENDENT

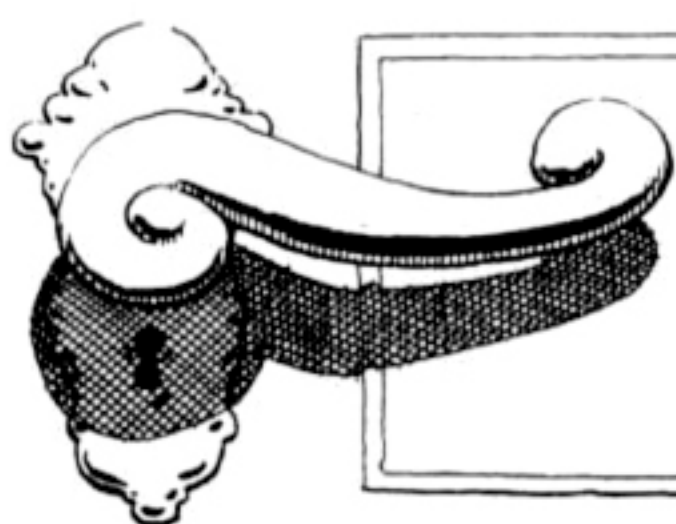
AND
OBVIOUSLY
I FAILED...

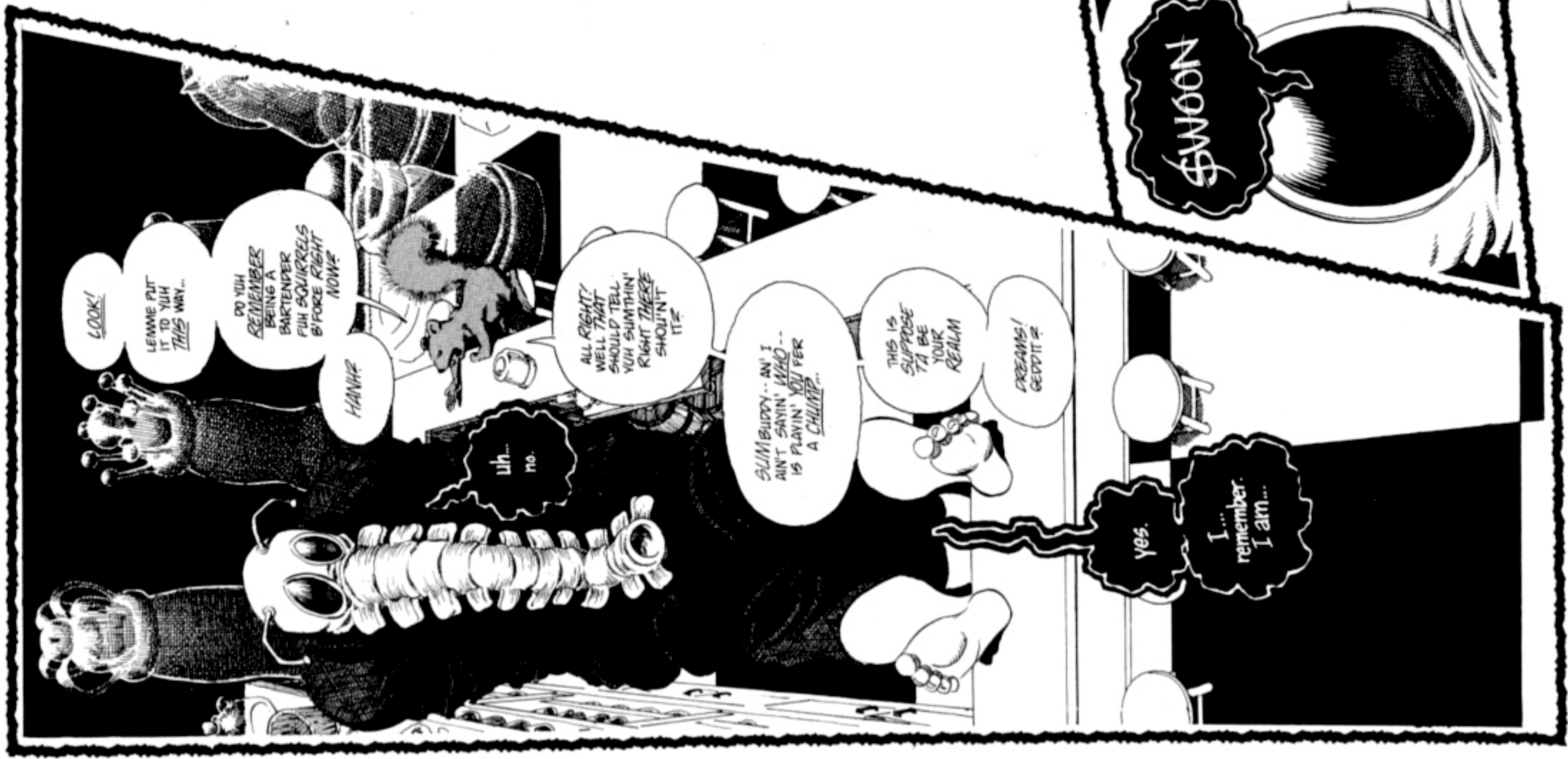


GO OUT AND JOIN
THE OTHERS... I'LL
BE OUT AS SOON
AS I'M DRESSED.

IF I CAN'T TEACH
ALL OF YOU HOW
TO LIVE, MAYBE
I CAN TEACH
YOU HOW TO
DIE...

KLIK
CLAK





Yes.
I... remember. I am...

DREAMS! GEDDIT?

THIS IS SUPPOSE TA BE YOUR REALM

SLIM BUDDY--AN' I AIN'T SAIN' WHO-- IS PLAVIN' YOU FER A CHALLENGE...

ALL RIGHT! WELL THAT SHOULD TELL YUH SUMTHIN' RIGHT THERE SHOULDN'T IT?

HANNE

DO YUH REMEMBER BEING A BARTENDER FUH SQUIRRELS BFORE RIGHT NOW?

LEMMIE PUT IT TO YUH THIS WAY...

LOOK!

\$4.66

BY THE WAY...

I'LL TAKE ANOTHER LIGHT ALE



WHUDDID I TELL YA LAST TIME?

YA PUT A HEAD ON IT AGAIN!

HEY!

NO BIG DEAL.

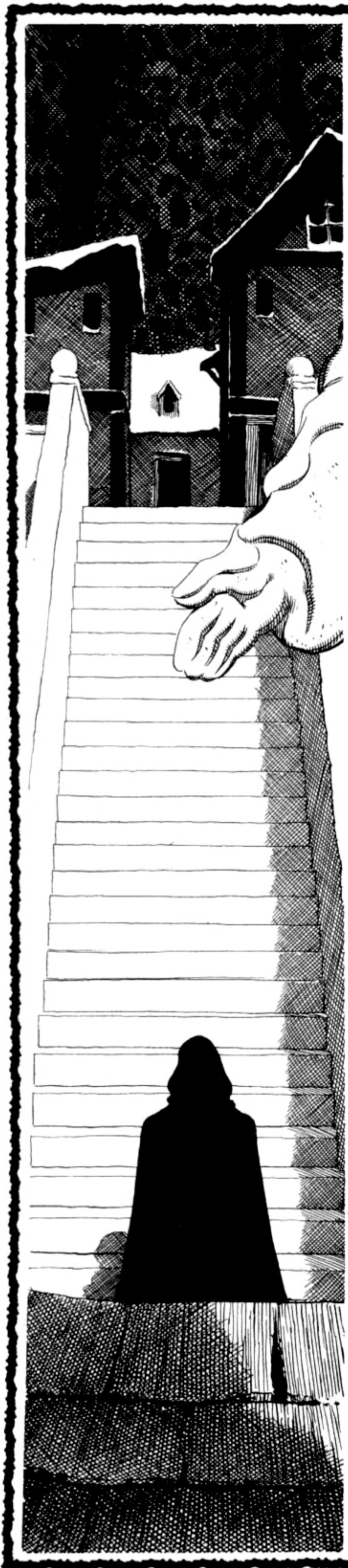
S'WHERE WUZ I?

OH, YEAH.

IF YOU'RE REBILLY THE LORD OF DREAMS Y'GONNA HAVE T'BE MORE ASSERTTIVE...

Sorry.





Cirin:
No no. You're
flipping the
pages too fast.

Dorana:
I'm sorry.
Perhaps if . . .

Cirin:
No. It just isn't
going to work.
Let me think.


Cirin:
We'll just have
to move the
books
themselves.
All of the
shelves which
have been
purified; move
all of those
books to the
end of the
library which
faces the
Ascension
site. All of the
shelves which
haven't been
purified; move
all of those
books to the
opposite end
of the library.

Dorana:
Yes, Great
Cirin.

Cirin:
You'll have to
work quickly.
We're running
out of time as
it is.

Dorana:
Yes, Great
Cirin.





If there was ever a more concrete example of the sheer willful and contrary nature of daughters when they are allowed to roam the corridors of power, unchecked and unfettered, it is the Eye in the Pyramid. Ostensibly based on an ancient and marginal philosophy, it amounts to little more than disobedience and rebelliousness as political theory. Fortunately the adherents of this cult are easily discovered and rooted out; a wise and organized leader has only to seek out those areas of government where information and decision-making are regularly impeded or neutralized and remove the person responsible. It is less a political movement than it is a haven for misguided pranksters.

**Cirin
The New Matriarchy**



The Eye in the Pyramid (unlike the ancient symbol of wisdom) is located in the middle of the pyramid, not at its apex. It applies to all hierarchical systems. As applied to Kevillism, it is an illustration of the power which resides at the so-called lower echelons of hierarchical systems. Anyone with any experience in government or business knows that those supposedly in power have only a cursory awareness of how the system operates, and a nearly complete ignorance of the day-in day-out exchange of information, book-keeping and paper-work which is its life's blood. Through my writings on the Eye in the Pyramid, I endeavour only to make secretaries, book-keepers, executive assistants and others aware that they, and not their superiors, control the levers of power. That awareness is my sole motivation and the goal I wish to achieve. What they choose to do with that awareness, once they have achieved it, is entirely up to them and of no interest to me whatsoever.

**Astoria
Kevillist Origins**





SORRY TO INTERRUPT.

BUT I THOUGHT THE WHOLE IDEA OF THIS...

'MOVEMENT' ...



...WAS TO SHARE THE DECISION-MAKING...

NO LEADERS.

NO FOLLOWERS.



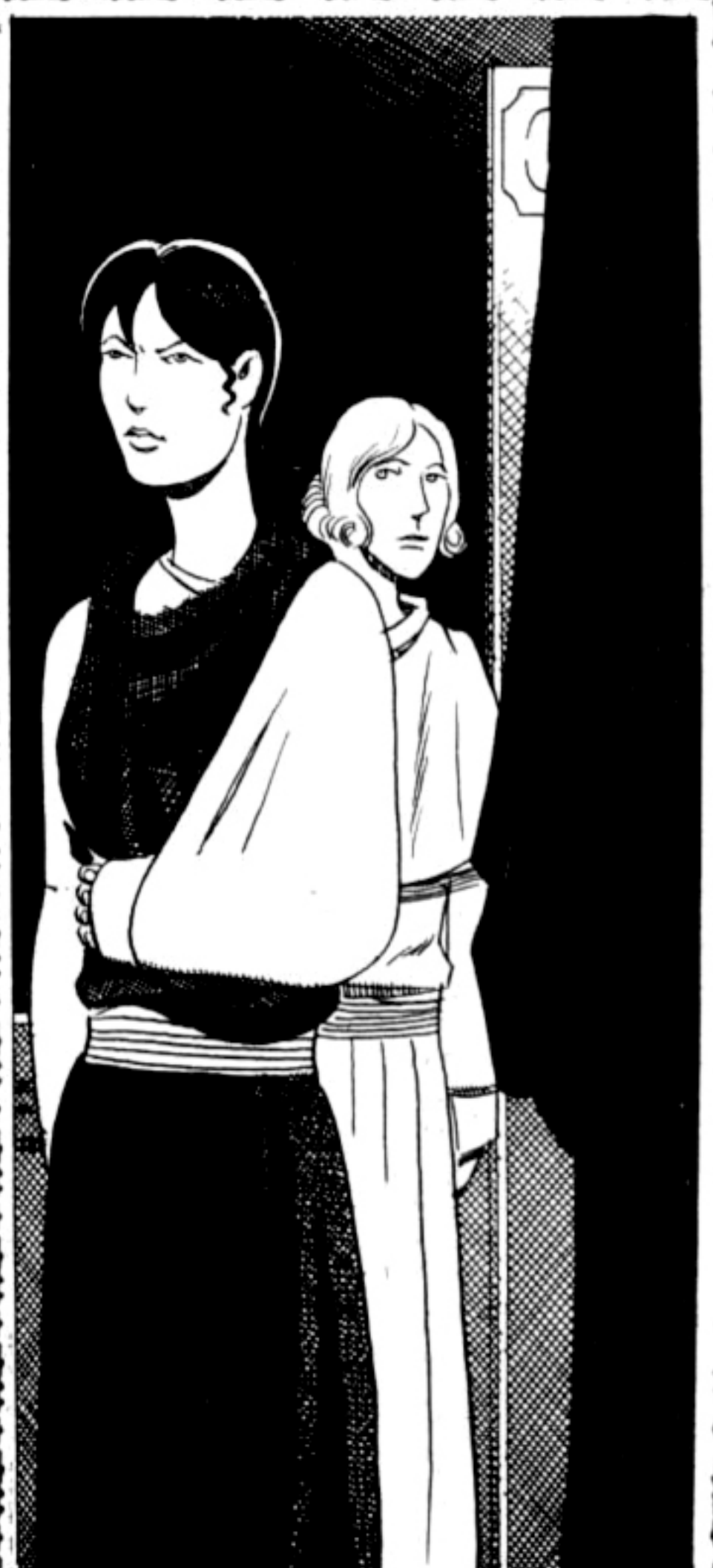
NOW, IF YOU HAVE A PLAN-- I'M SURE WE'D ALL LOVE TO HEAR IT

ON THE OTHER HAND, IF YOU JUST WANT TO SNAP YOUR FINGERS ...

AND HAVE EVERYONE JUST FETCH AND CARRY FOR YOU ...



MAYBE YOU SHOULD HAVE STUCK WITH YOUR MALE HOUSE-PETS.





WHEN SHE HAD

shared her dream that morning with Cirin, this was exactly what Astoria had been able to see for the first time. The

complaint was valid. Had she not just reduced a young woman to tears by insisting that she was not a queen, not a goddess? and yet here she was, striding about the room, barking commands, using her personal magnetism, her charisma to sweep these women along a chosen path. She could feel all eyes in the room upon her, awaiting her answer. All her ideals and the newly-awakened awareness of her own folly wanted, simply, to agree. 'Yes. You're quite right,' she wanted to say, 'Let's sit down and discuss our options.' But even as the thought came, she knew that was not what she would say. Already she felt herself swept into the momentum of events; the irresistible tide of disaster which loomed before them all. She was not helpless to affect the outcome; in point of fact she was choosing helplessness. Despite her protests, she *was* a leader and even as she assessed all the inherent contradictions; the rightness of the woman who had dared to challenge her authority, the hypocrisy of her own position; her mind was weighing a variety of replies; not on the basis of what was right, but rather on the basis of what was expeditious; what would produce the proper effect. She was simultaneously amused and appalled that the proper effect she sought was blind and unquestioning obedience. A mere handful of seconds had passed, but all her experience told her that the balance of opinion in the room was very much in favour of obedience. Had she felt the momentum shifting in favour of this newcomer, she would have thrown a tantrum (as well as some heavy and fragile artifact at a key moment in her monologue as a kind of punctuation). The fear in the room, however, was her greatest asset at this point. Her reply needed to be calm, deliberate and succinct. It needed only an undertone of blame; only a suggestion that she, Astoria, could yet save the day and her followers' fear would do the rest. Her followers. If she was not a queen or a goddess, why did she always refer to them as followers? With practiced ease, she shifted her weight from her heels to the balls of her feet and began to speak.



YES.
OF
COURSE.

IDEALLY
THAT WAS
THE WAY
THINGS
SHOULD
WORK



OF COURSE
IDEALLY ALL
OF YOU
SHOULDN'T HAVE
FLOCKED TO
THIS HOTEL

IDEALLY
YOU SHOULD
STILL BE
MANIPULATING
US FROM
WITHIN...

ANONYMOUSLY.



SOME OF
YOU STILL
ARE...

THOSE WHO
HAVE CHOSEN
TO GATHER AROUND
ME...

...HOWEVER...



WILL JUST
HAVE TO
TRUST THAT
I'M MAKING
THE RIGHT
CHOICES.



UNLESS

OF
COURSE

YOU WANT TO
PERSUADE
US ALL TO
FOLLOW
YOU...



LET ME
KNOW WHEN
YOU HAVE
EVERYTHING
TOGETHER
...

I'LL
BE IN MY
SUITE...



VINTAGE ASTORIA

performance, she thought wryly to herself. Her face was a mask, composed in equal measure of concern, decisiveness and introspection. She retreated slowly but could see that she had achieved her goal. Some of her followers looked at her with awe; those were the ones who were the most afraid. Some smiled, knowingly; those were the ones who identified with her. To them, the dismissal of the newcomer was a victory which they shared with her. Some of them (very very few) could see that she had evaded, not answered the charge. They were the most intelligent. They would wrestle with the contradiction internally: their loyalty and their idealism in a perfect stasis. Loyalty would place them firmly and comfortably within the newly-reinforced consensus. Idealism would force them to side with the discredited minority viewpoint. If any discussion ensued in her absence, Astoria knew they would adopt a wait-and-see position. Carefully, deliberately, she opened the door to her suite, and then closed it behind her.

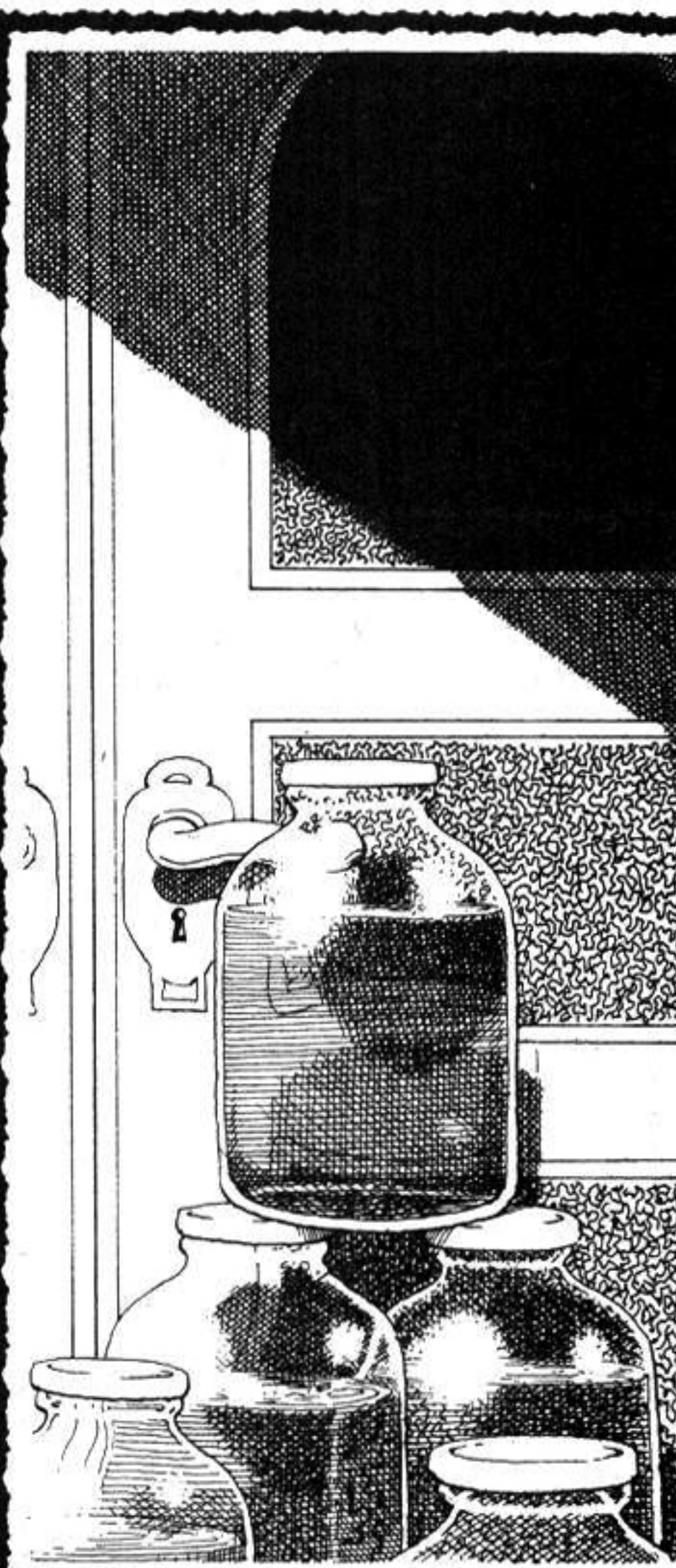
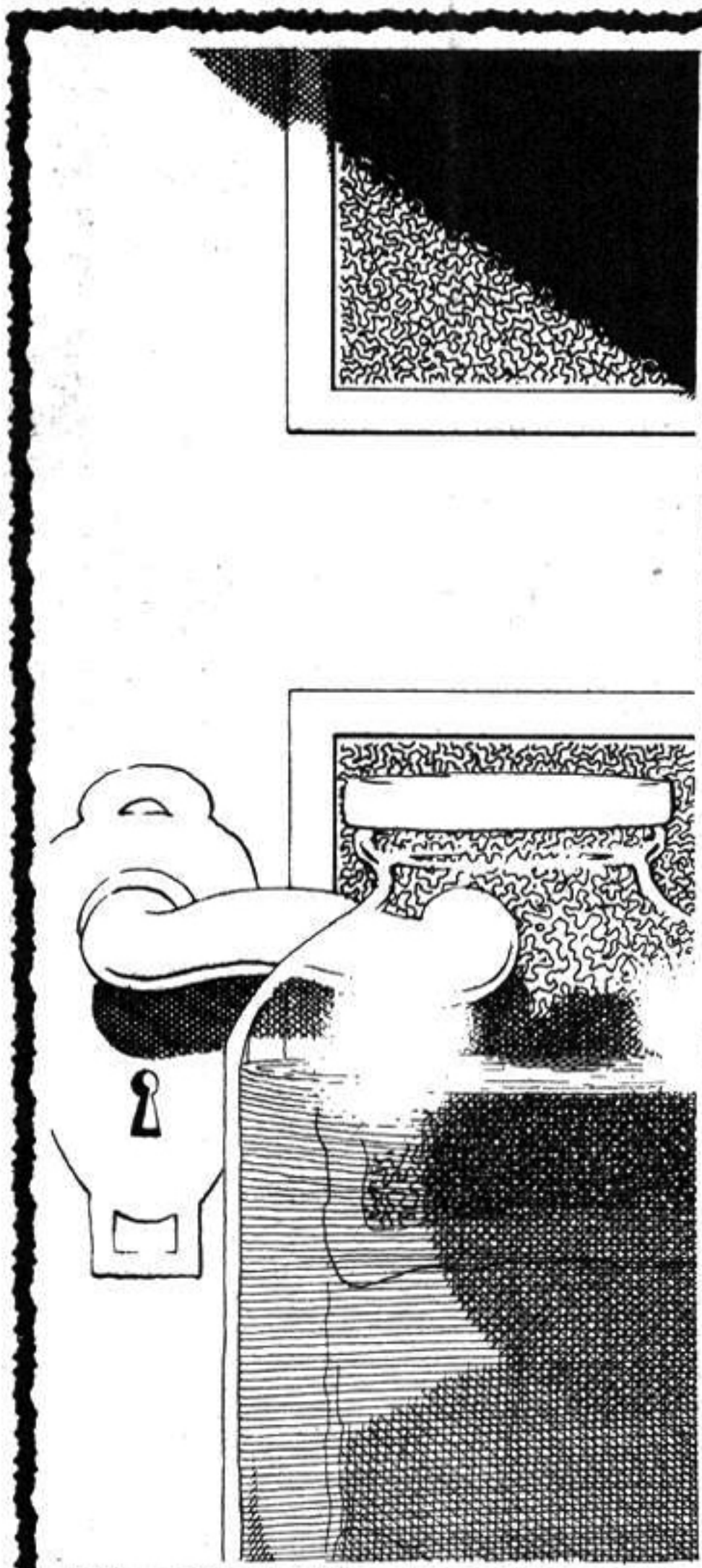


HE LISTENED

briefly as the quiet murmur of voices began outside. She thought of the faces that she had seen. The young ones trying to look old. The old ones trying to look young. Girls. Women. Ladies. There was still time to change course. She could walk back out and explain that she was tired of rhetorical sleight-of-hand; ask them what it was they wanted to do. Ask them what she should do. The newcomer and the ones who could see the verbal gamesmanship for what it was. What would they say? Whatever they would say, she thought to herself, I would have a pat answer. And that pat answer would point them towards blind and unquestioning obedience. The voices outside the door subsided. In her minds' eye Astoria could see flames consuming the hotel.







TIME PASSED

like wet sand through an hour-glass. She had to keep them all busy; their attentions focussed on minutiae.

If they stopped working, they would start thinking and if they started thinking they would realize that she intended a mass suicide by fire. She moved swiftly from place to place; praising the mindless enterprise of the blindly obedient; discussing impossible strategies with the intelligent and the insightful. Their complete lack of military background was her greatest asset. Astoria knew that Cirin's troops surrounded them and would strike at every entrance simultaneously. It was, however, an easy matter to persuade her 'defenders' that the attack would center on a single entrance and that they had only to set a fire there and they would be able to escape under cover of flames, smoke and confusion. Whenever one of them would grow quiet and contemplative, she would hug them to her with her good arm and say firmly, 'the Goddess is with us'. As the sun began its descent toward the horizon she instructed the most obedient to begin preparing a large meal and to clean and scrub the main foyer. She raced back and forth from entrance to entrance. 'The Goddess is with us', 'the Goddess is with us'.

It wouldn't be long, now.



Wait!

I remember ...

The Ascension!

All of this is... intended to... distract me from the Ascension!

I have been such a silly

silly

SWOON

er... ONE MORE FOR THE ROAD, THERE, SQUIRE?

Perhaps a small frozen strawberry daiquiri... with a little paper ... paper...

OR... uh... MAYBE YOU'D JUST LIKE A BOWL OF ...

NO!...
BEGONE
FALSE
DREAM!

POIT?

FISH
CRACKERS

now.

now I am the... Lord
of the ... Dream Realm
once more.

I
must

meditate.

OMMMMMMM

HSSSS!

POIT

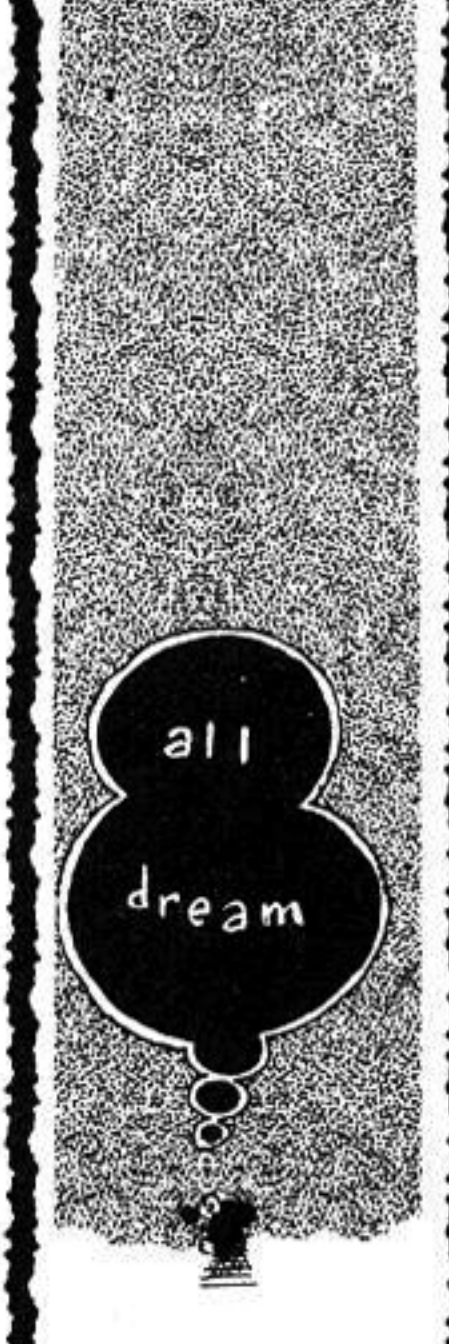
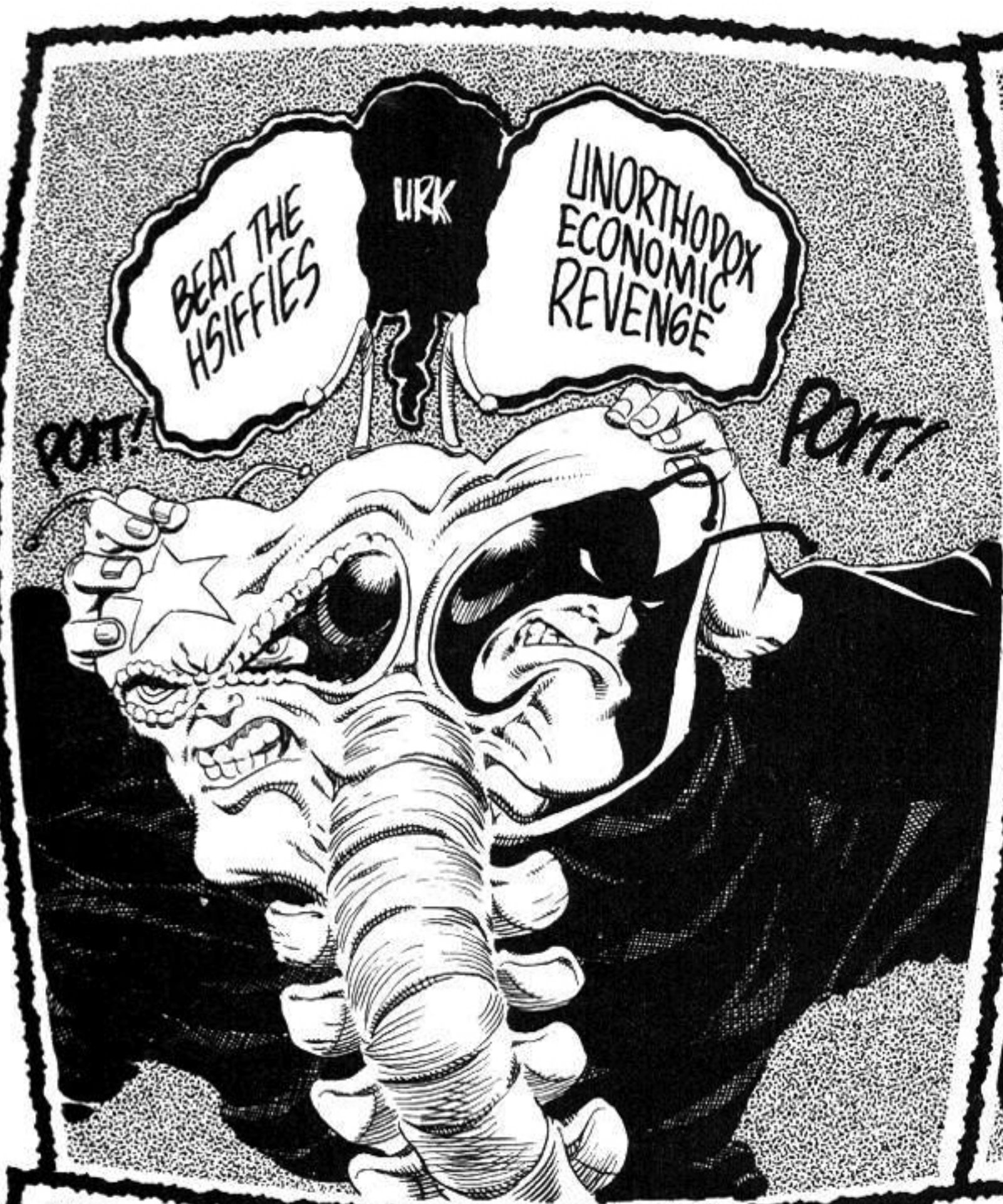
PHUT

I am
Roach
nevermore

calm
I must
be...

UNH

NO!





EREBUS HAD BEEN

wide awake for some time. He felt no ill effects from his drunken binge. He heard the voice of Magus Doran; their final conversation over two decades before.

'You have been my least successful pupil and yet I am as certain today as I was the day you came here that Tarim has chosen you as his champion. When the time is right you will hear these words again. The priestesses and the queens seek to steal the magic and make it their own. Throughout history they have controlled, manipulated, contained and infected pure male magic. It is not theirs. It is ours! They are the soil in which the plant grows but they are not the plant itself. Left unchecked they will take over the churches, the armies, businesses and government. They won't stop until their malignancy; their poison has infected every corner of human society. They're mad. Every one of them. Follow insanity back to its source and you'll find a woman every time. When you hear these words again, there will be a throne that is rightfully yours and which you have lost through the poisonous interference of womankind. Take it back. You will have with you a symbol, a small token of female poison which will represent a dead memory and which has kept you weak. Put it aside.

You must be strong to redeem all the men who are weak. Tarim will guide you and assist you. But it is your strength alone which will turn the tide. You must save our magic in the name of the Living Tarim. It can live for the first time, free and unfettered if you are strong. Cast out the female poisons that have kept us oppressed and bound throughout all of human history.

Here's the bird that never flew.

Here's the tree that never grew.

Here's the bell that never rang.

Here's the fish that never swam.

It is the legend of Ketigern, the mage patron of the city of your father's birth.

Redeem us, young Cerebus.

'Redeem us.'



General Cho:
All of our
troops in the
Lower City,
Great Cirin.
We're ...
there are a few
exceptions
but we are
receiving
nothing but
discordant
imagery,
fantasies.
We're ...

Cirin:
What are you
saying?

General Cho:
They're all
asleep, Great
Cirin. They're
dreaming.

Cirin:
What about
Swoon
Country?
What about
Cerebus?

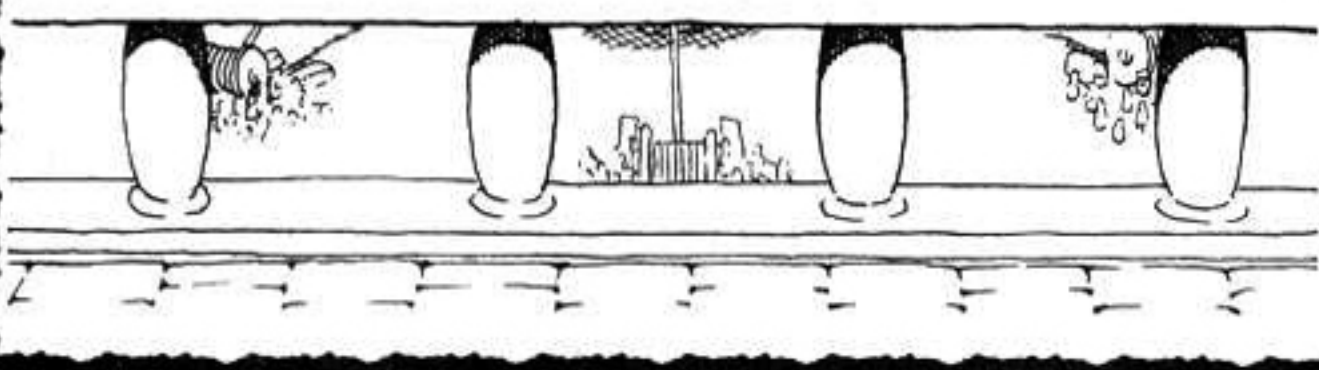
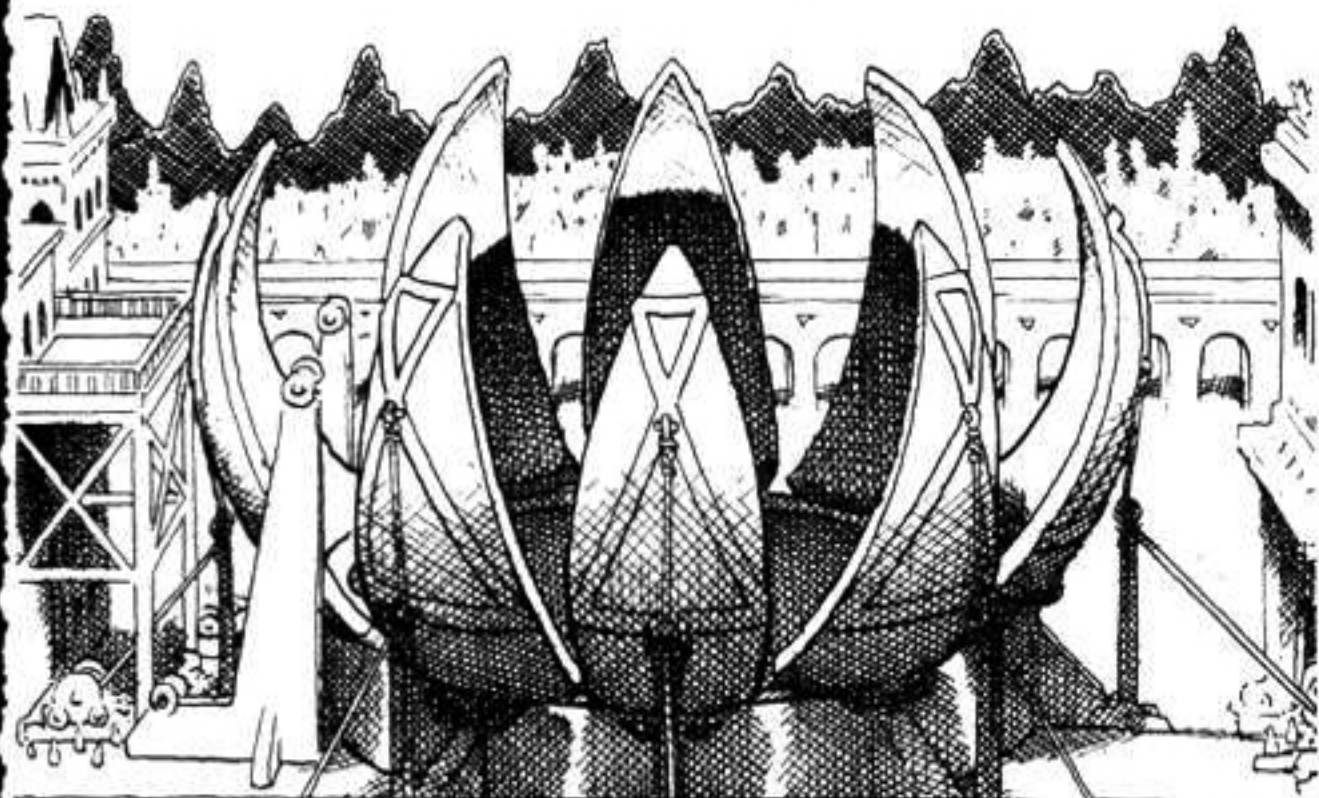
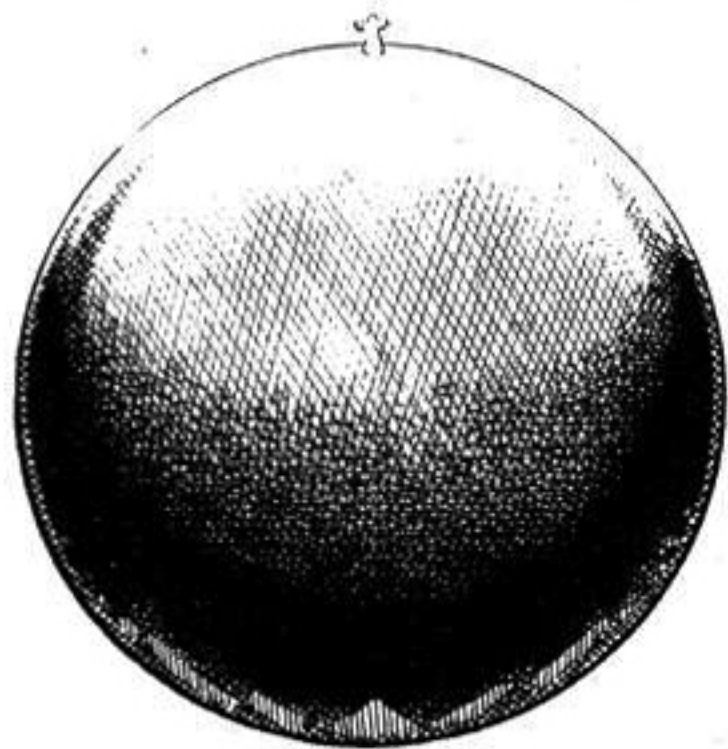
General Cho:
Great Cirin,
we don't
know. Our
people are
asleep. I've
just ...

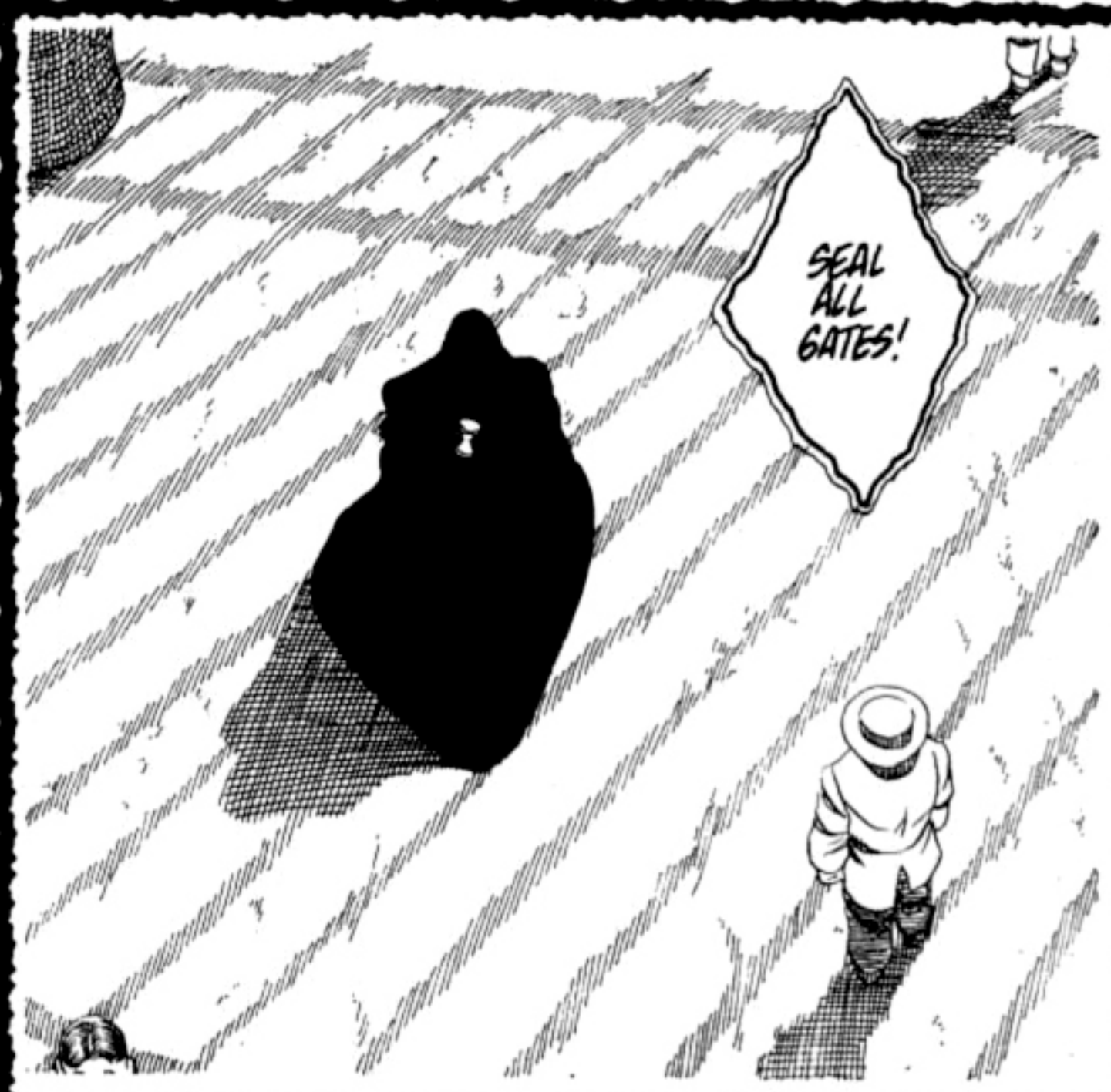
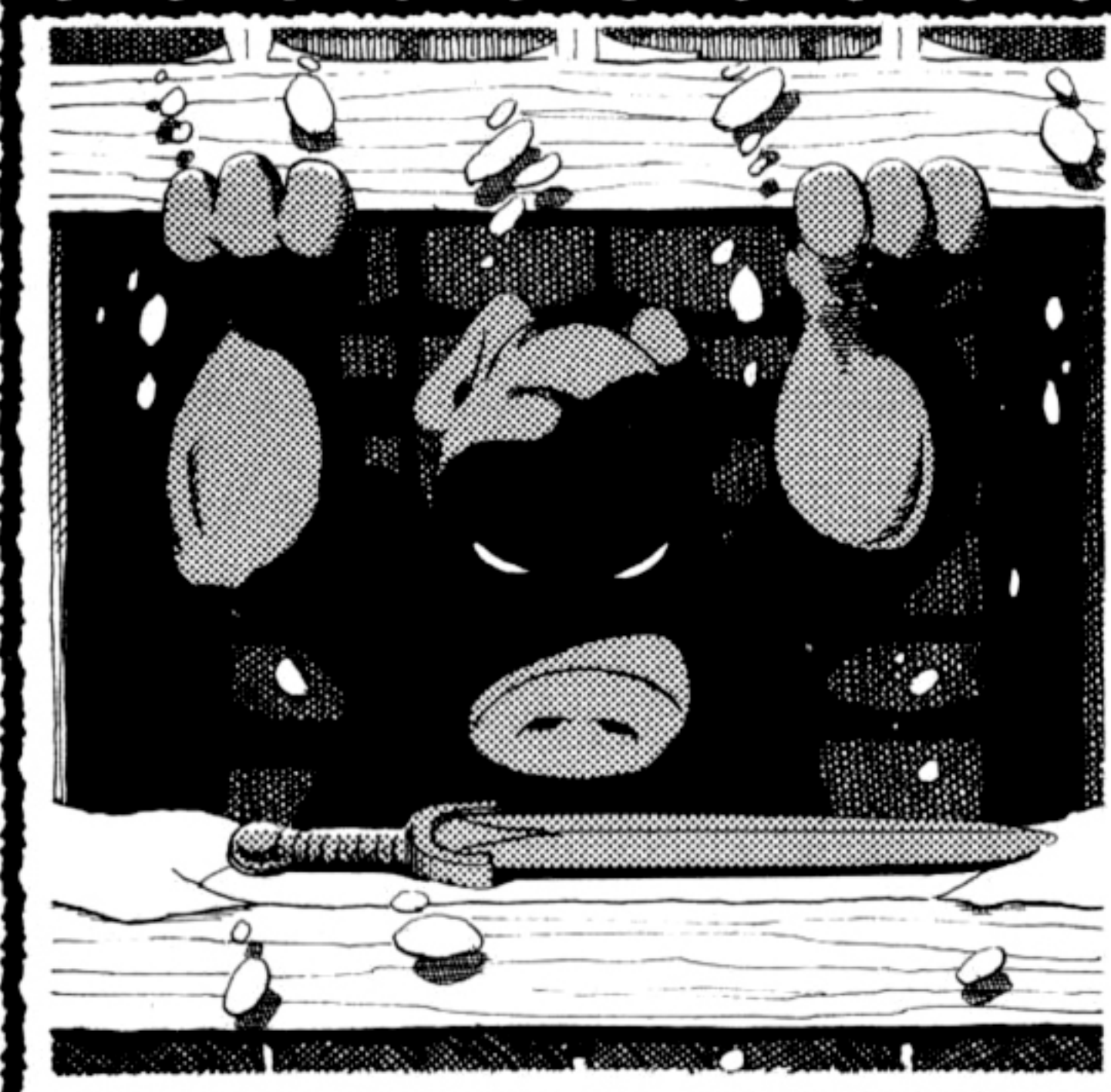
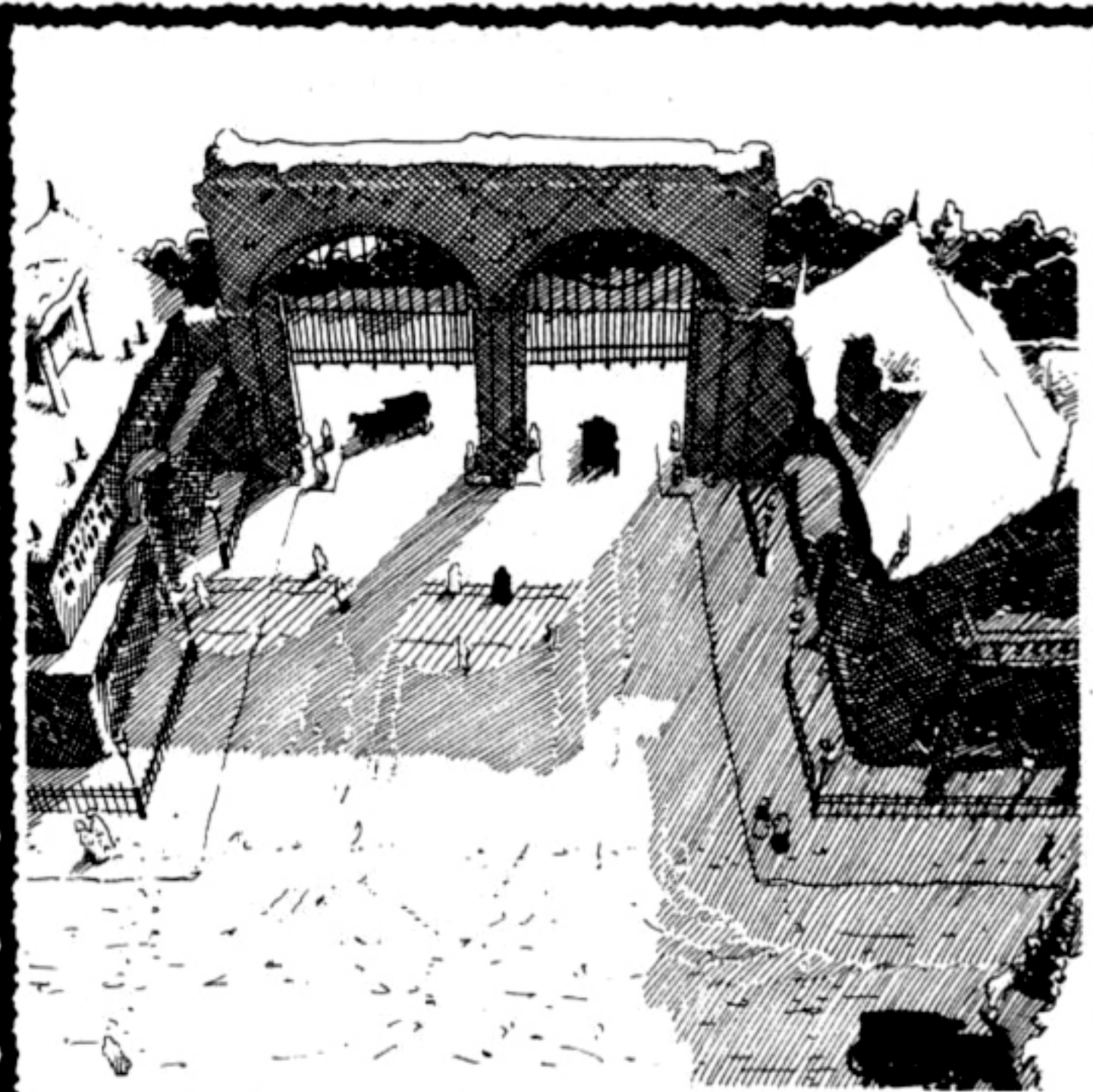
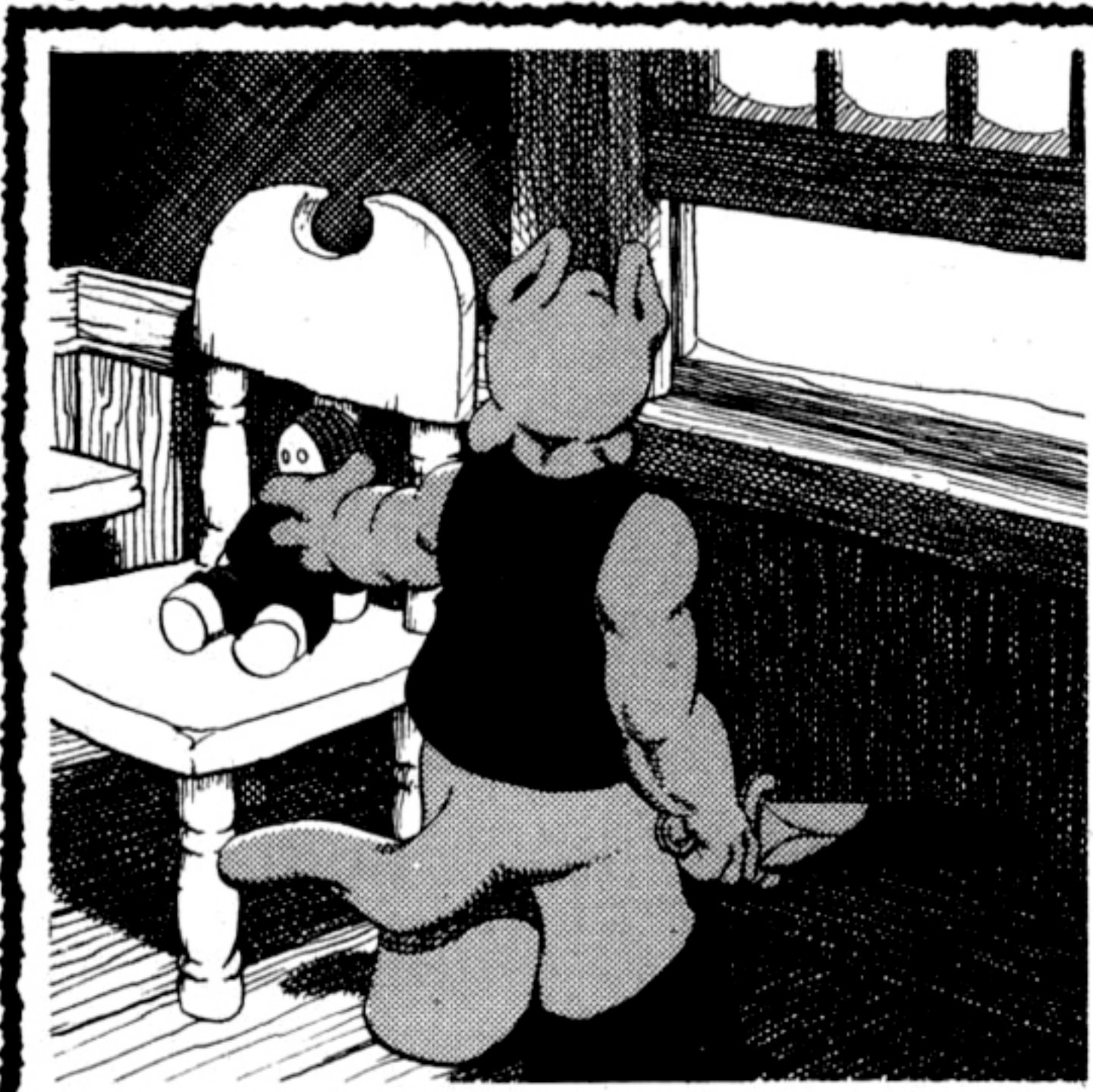
Cirin:
Why wasn't
I informed of
this? Damn
your eyes,
I said ...

General Cho:
Great Cirin
it just
happened.
Just this
minute. I
told you
immediately;
as soon as I
was certain.

Cirin:
All right.
All right.
Seal the
Upper City.
The gold is
being poured
right now.
Whoever is
behind this
they're too
late. We've
won. Give
the order.

General Cho:
Yes, Great
Cirin.







ND THEN ASTORIA

had a vision. There she was in the park near her parents' home. She was dressed for church, but as had been her habit she had gone to the park to fantasize about her own church that she would build one day; a courtyard open to the skies with wild

flowers growing all around. In place of an altar there would be an ornate bowl filled with exotic seeds and berries to attract beautiful and rare birds. People would talk to each other instead of listening to the droning voice of a tedious old . . .

A man had approached her. Even at that age (nine? ten?) she had had no fear of men. As he sat down beside her she had fixed him with a direct and level gaze. Without preamble he had handed her a small book with a single name; 'Kevil' engraved on its binding. 'Here' he had said. Without a word of acknowledgement she had flipped to the first page and had begun to read. An inner peace descended over her as the words appeared before her again.

*"Wither shall we go? Shall we debate
in valley or on peak?
Where shall we dwell? In what nobler
land than the isle of sunset?
Where else shall we walk in peace
to and fro, on fertile ground?
Who but I can take you to where
the stream runs, or falls,
clearest?"*

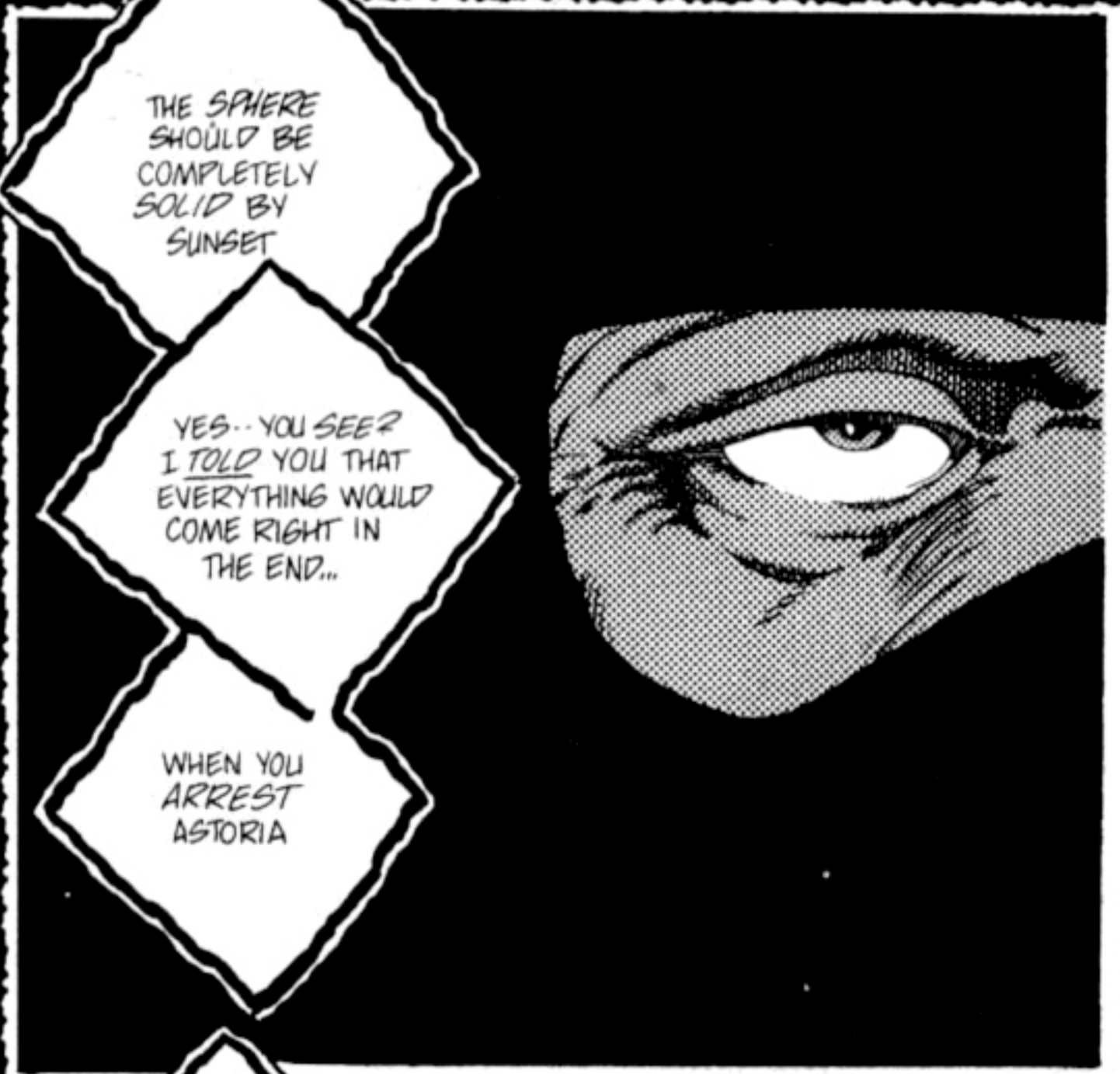
She had reread the passage several times; each word had seemed so sweet, so sublime, so perfect and pure.

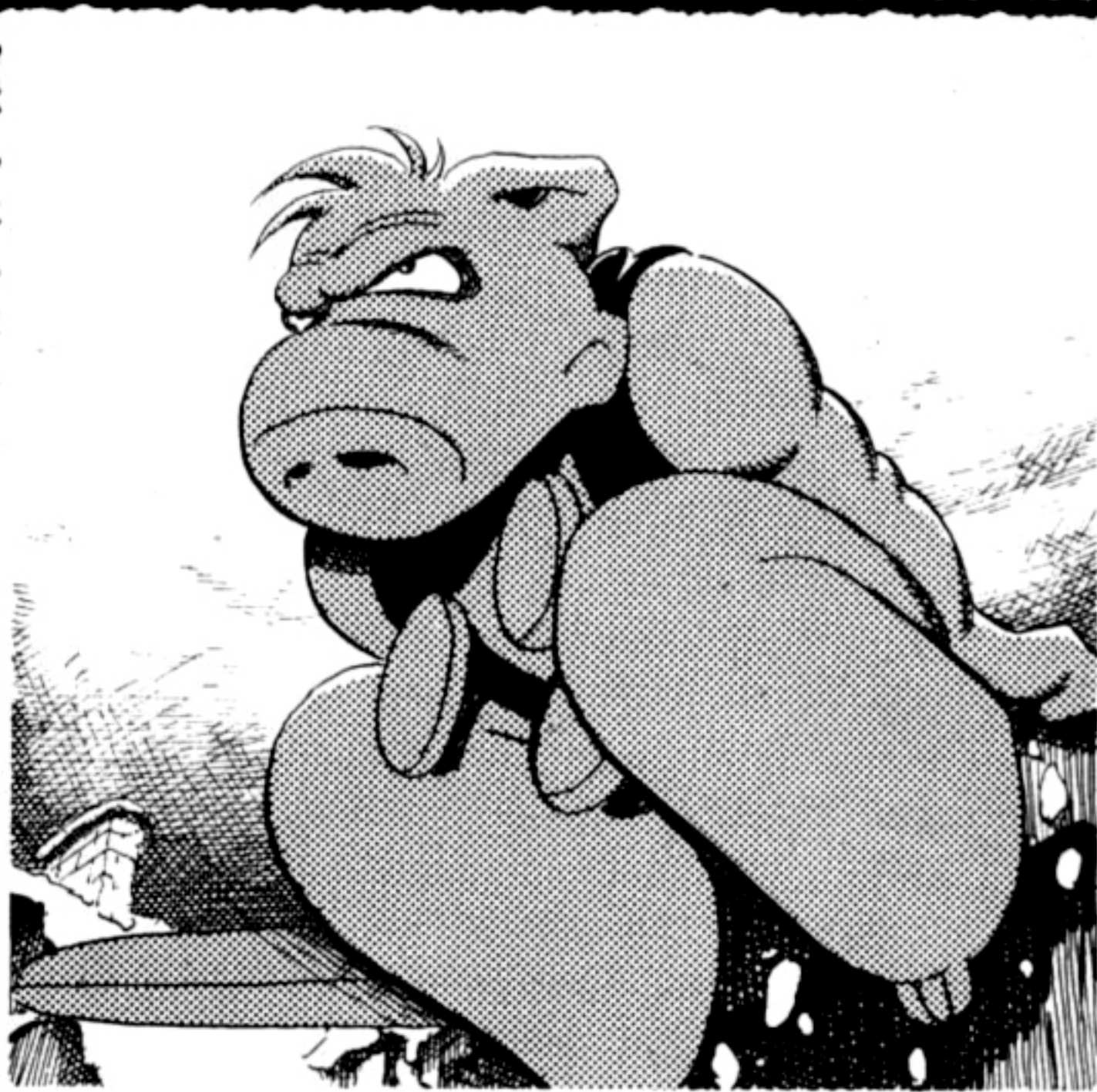
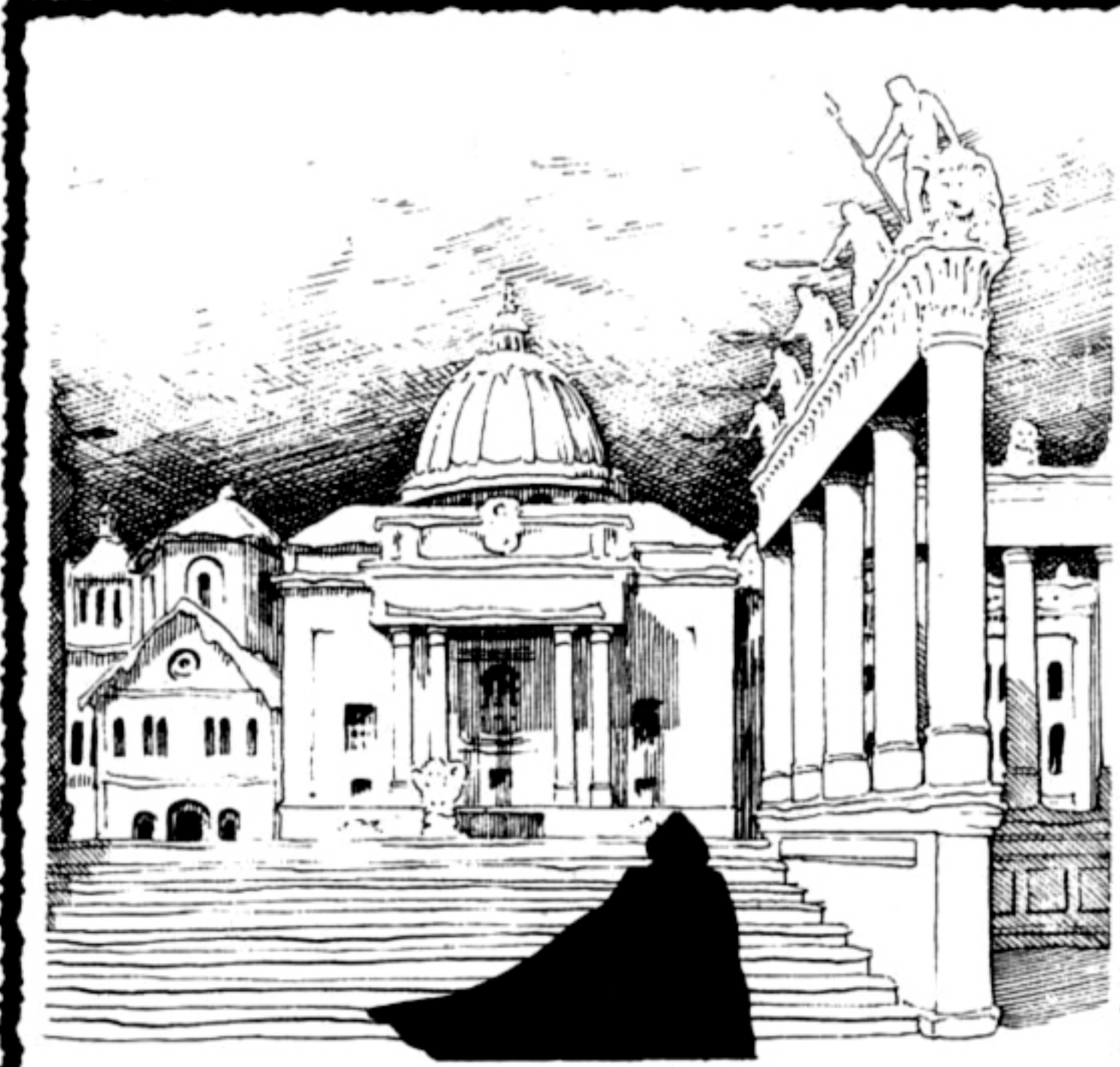
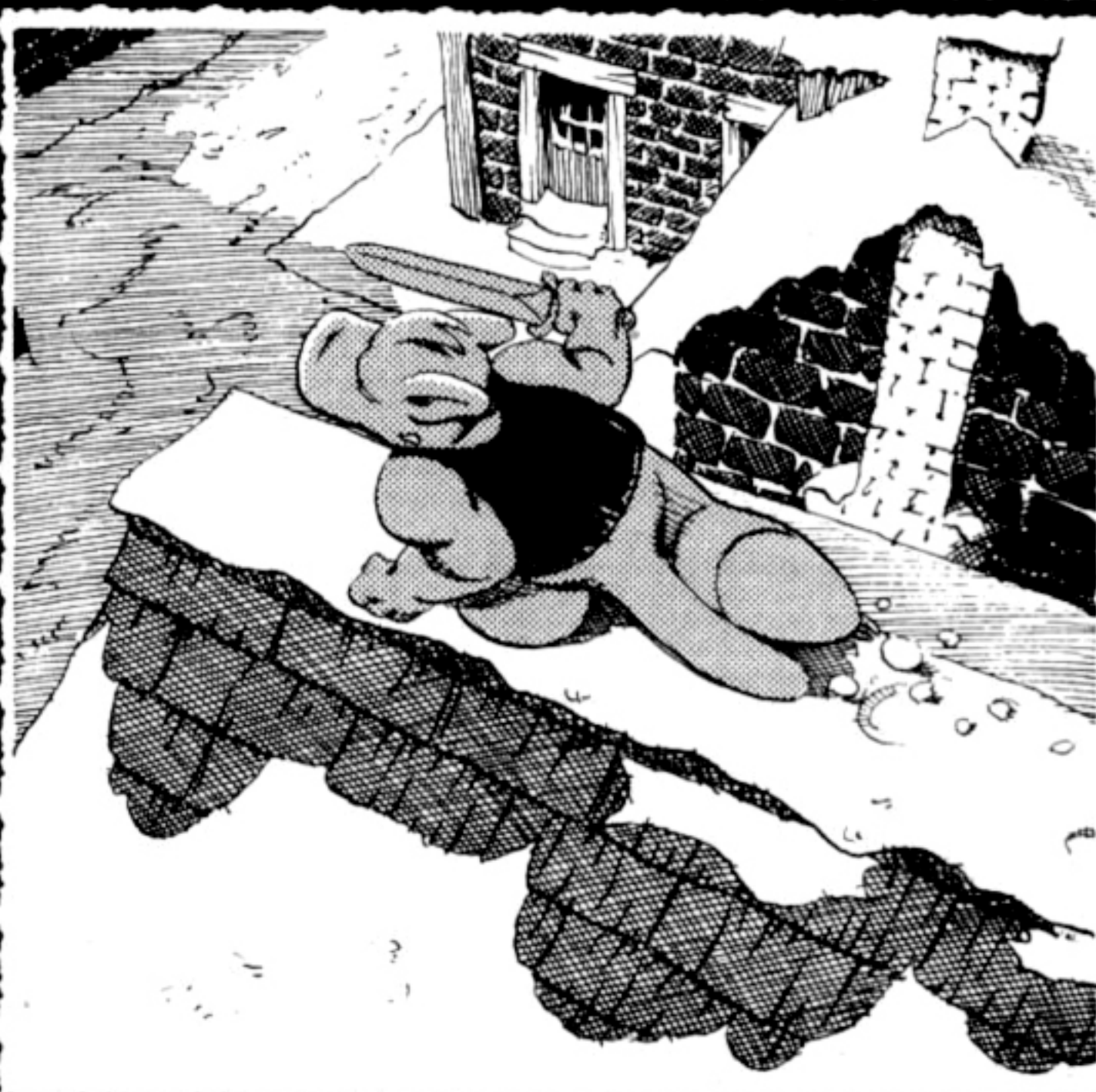
'How much do you want for it,' she had asked, hoping the price would be less than the three copper bits tucked inside her white cotton glove; money which her mother had intended for the church collection plate. But even as she looked up, her little face solemn and determined, the man was gone. Without bothering to look around for him, she began reading. She hadn't looked up again until she had difficulty distinguishing the printed words in front of her. She realized, then, that the sun had already set and night was fast approaching.

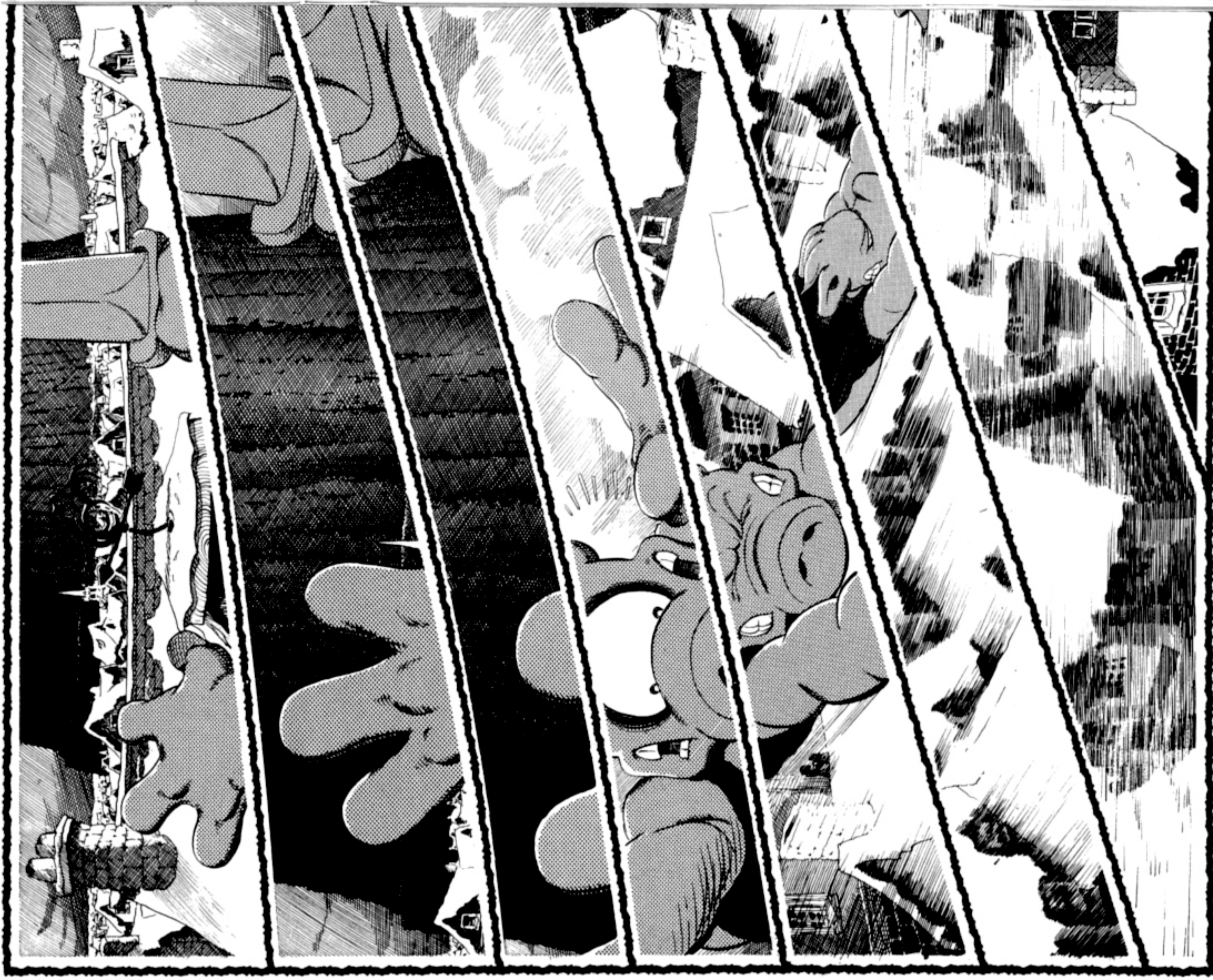
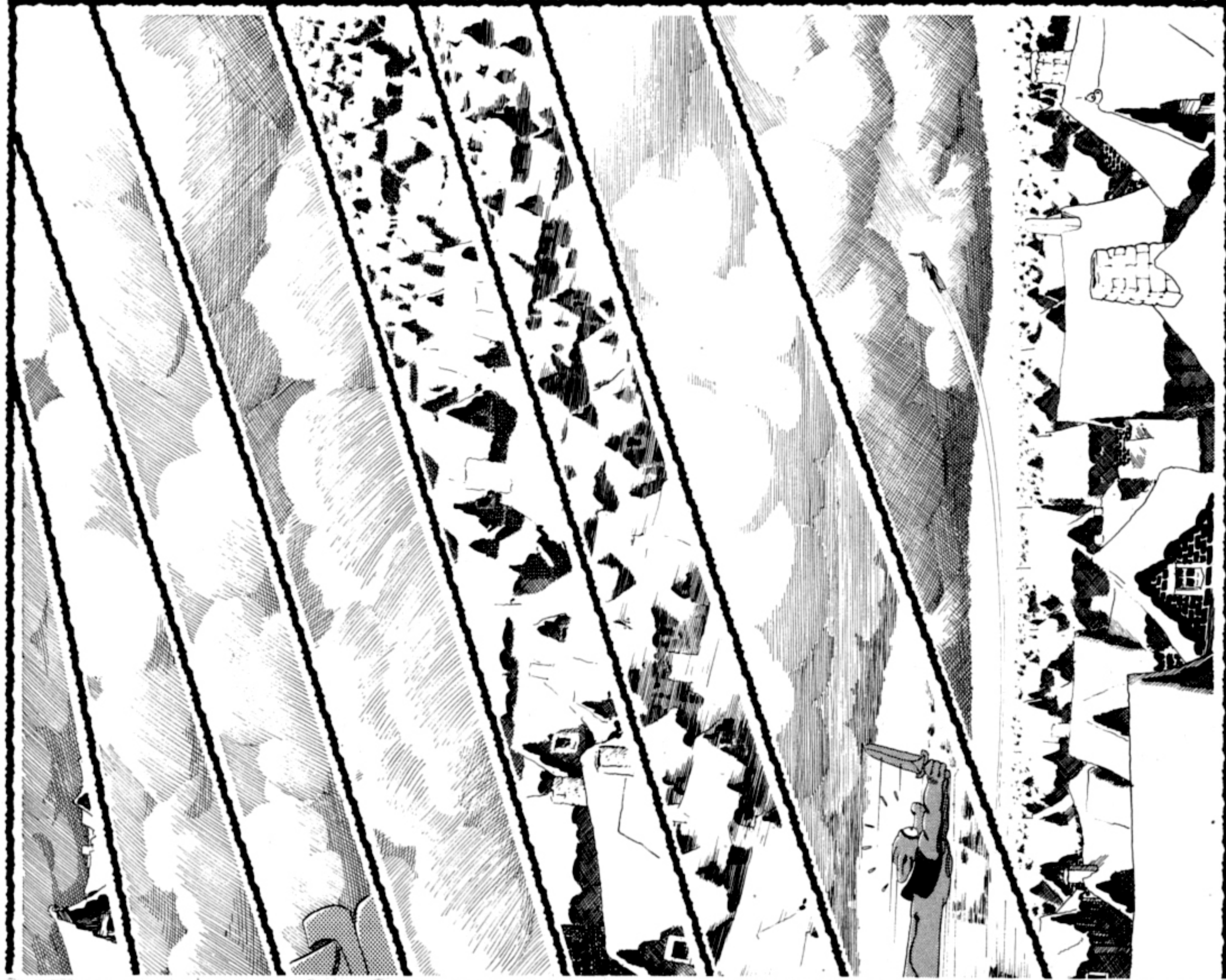
Hiding the book in her underwear, she had hurried home.

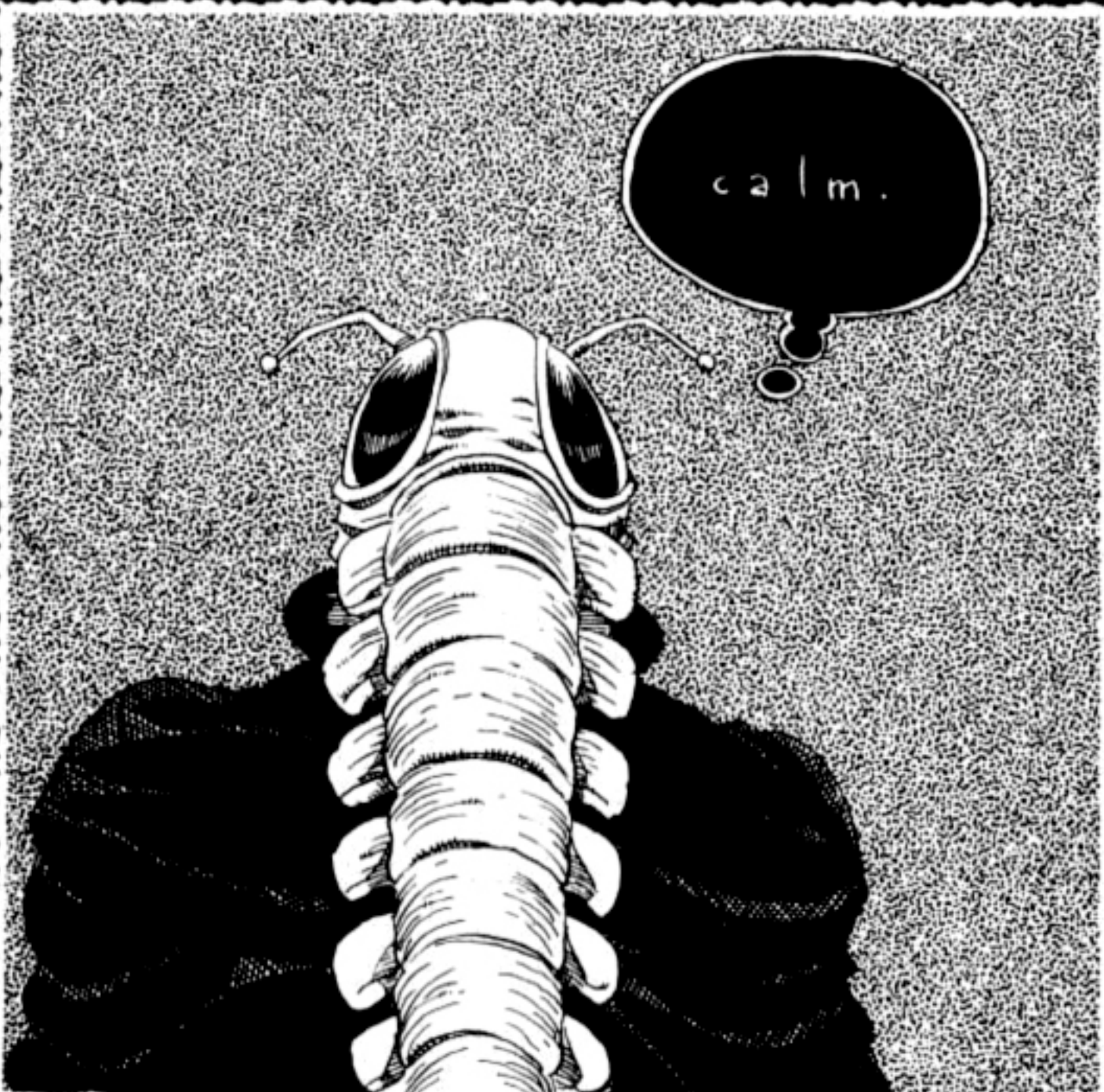
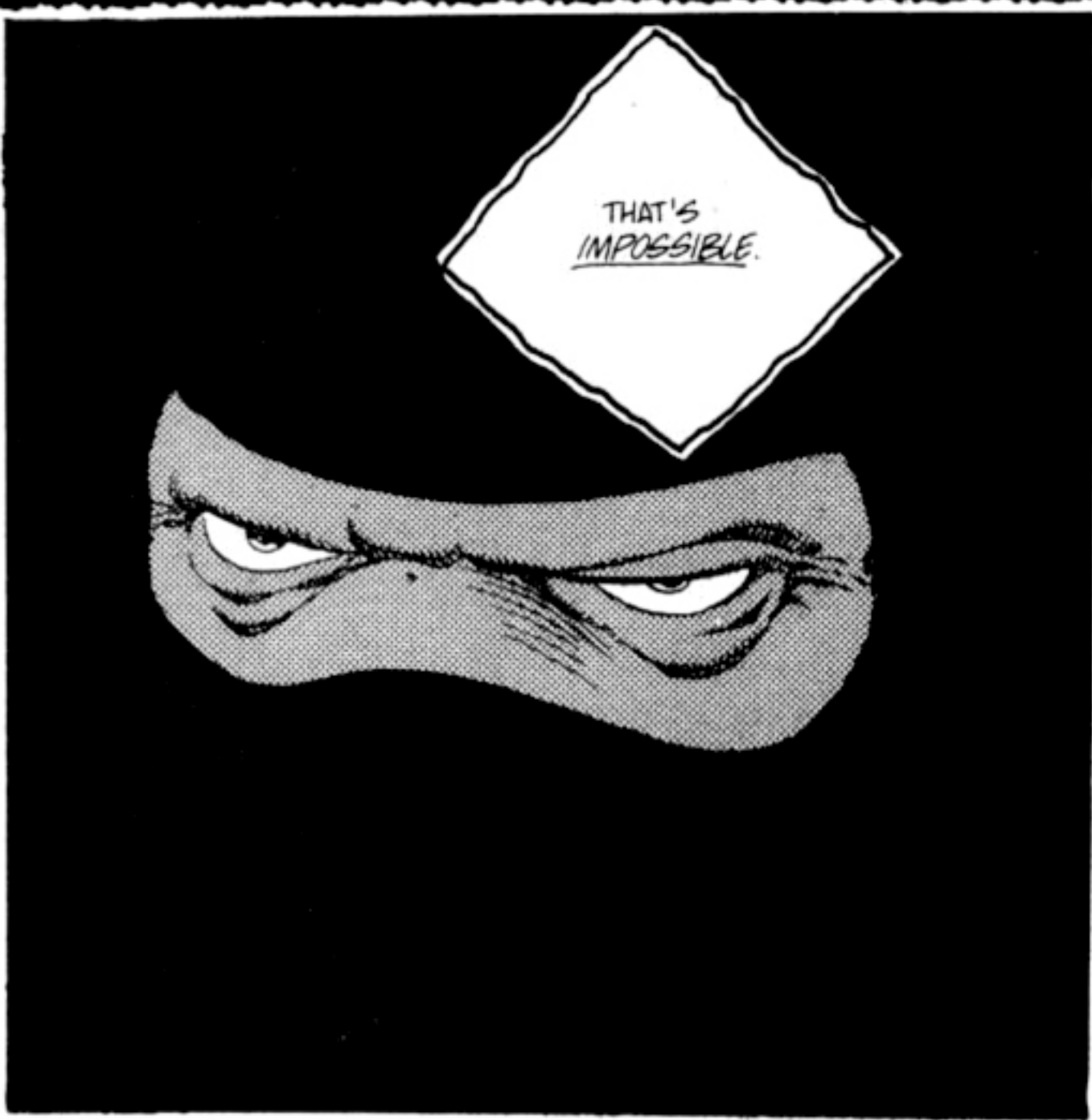
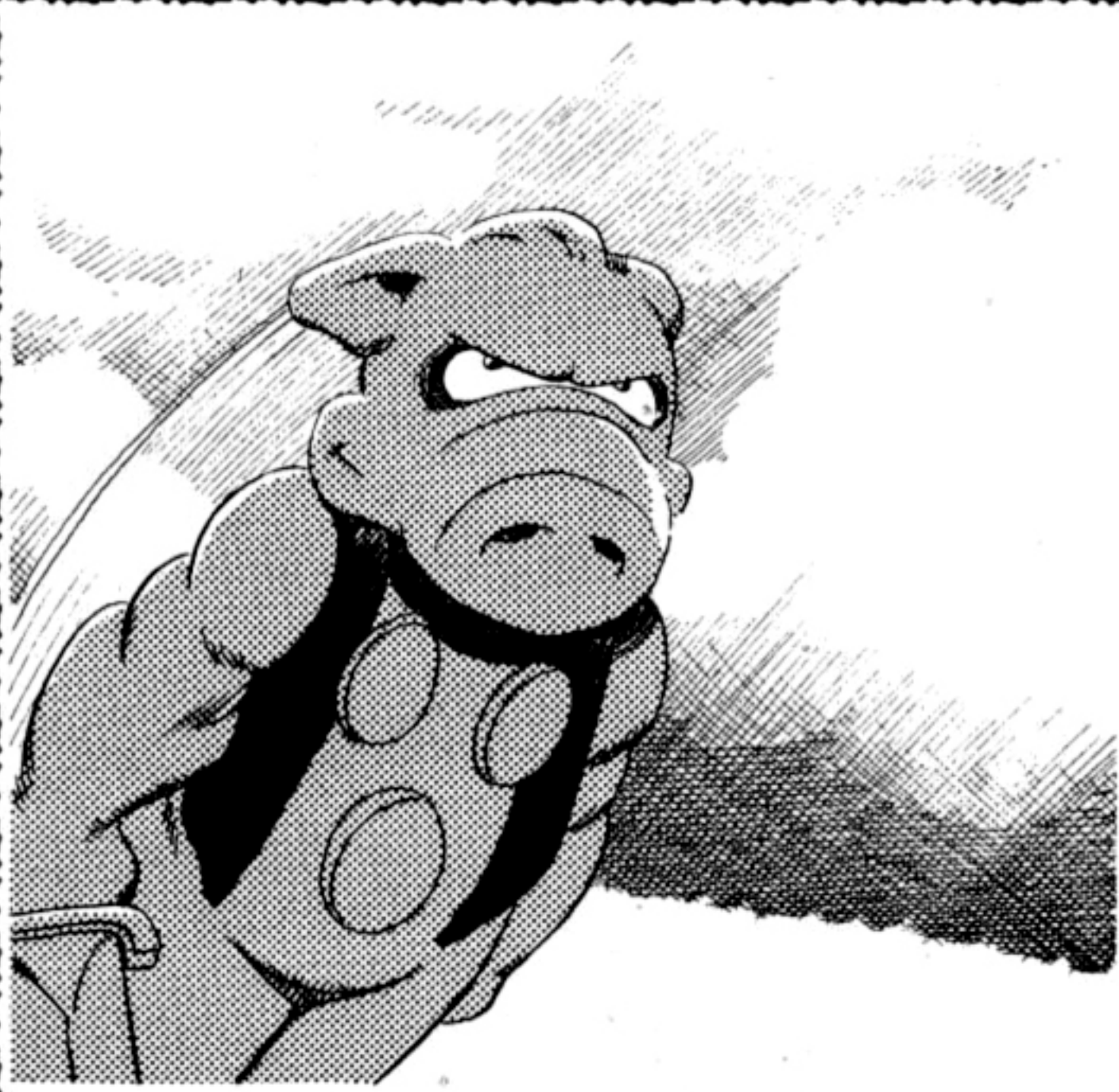
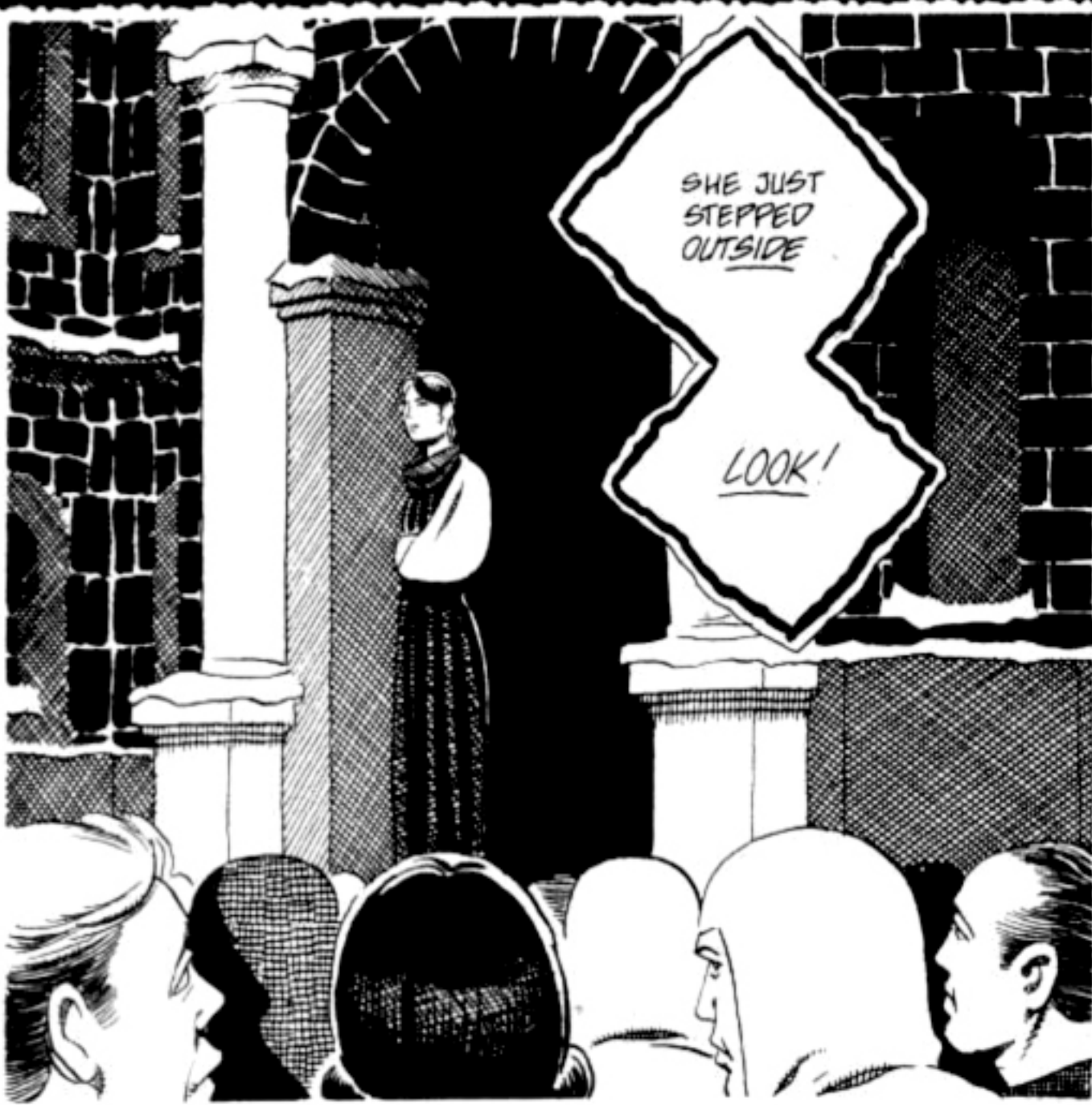


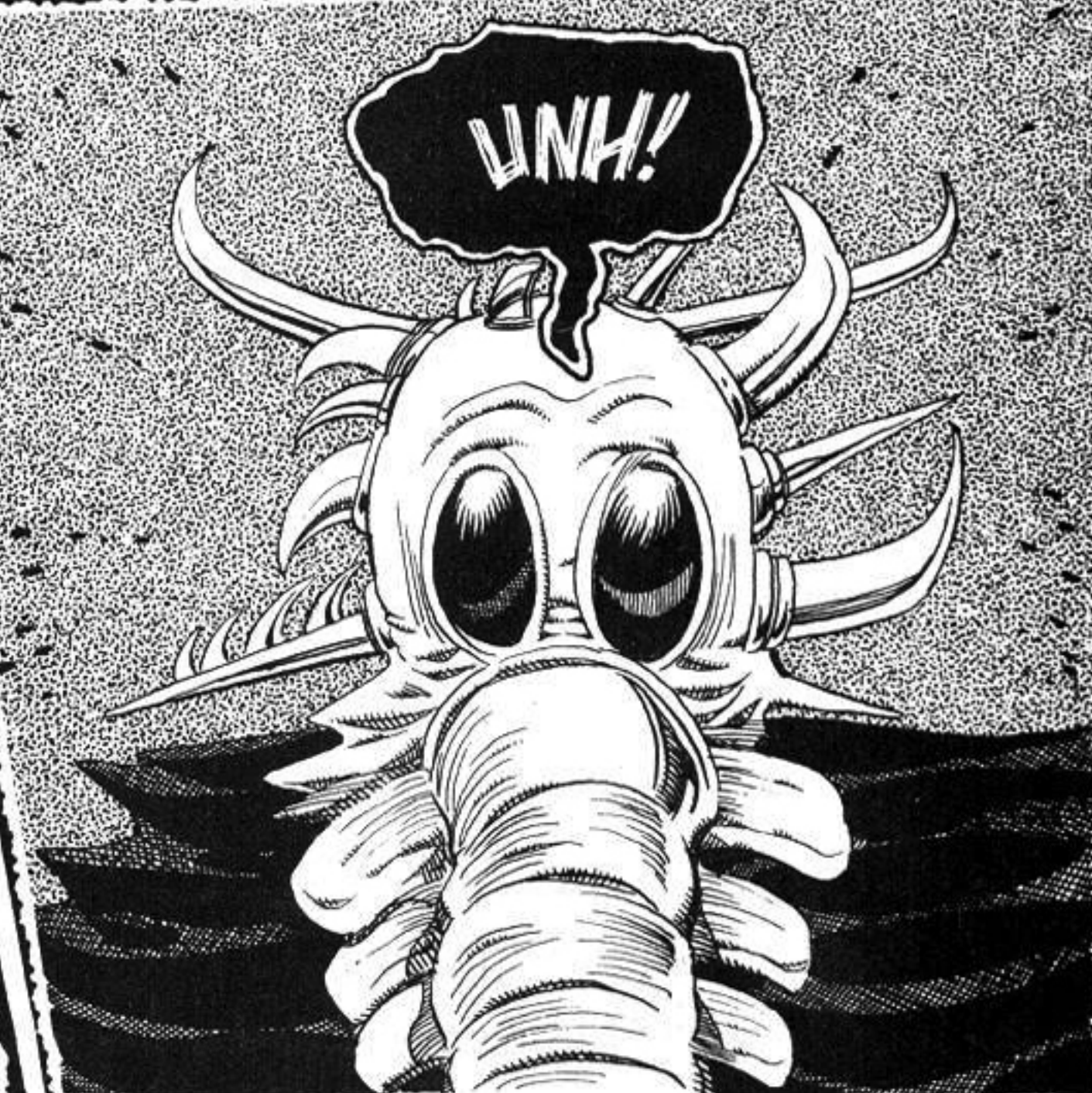
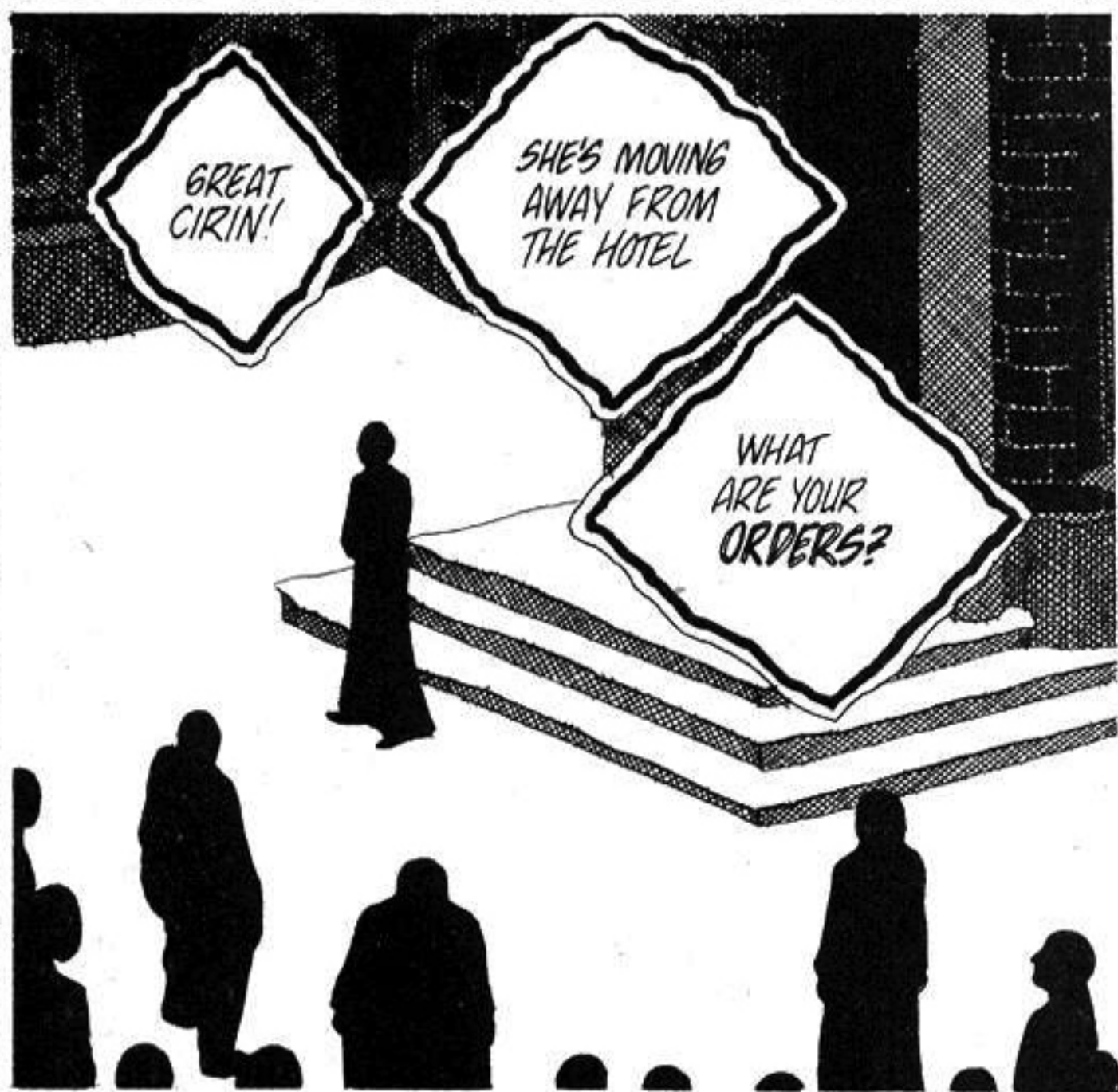


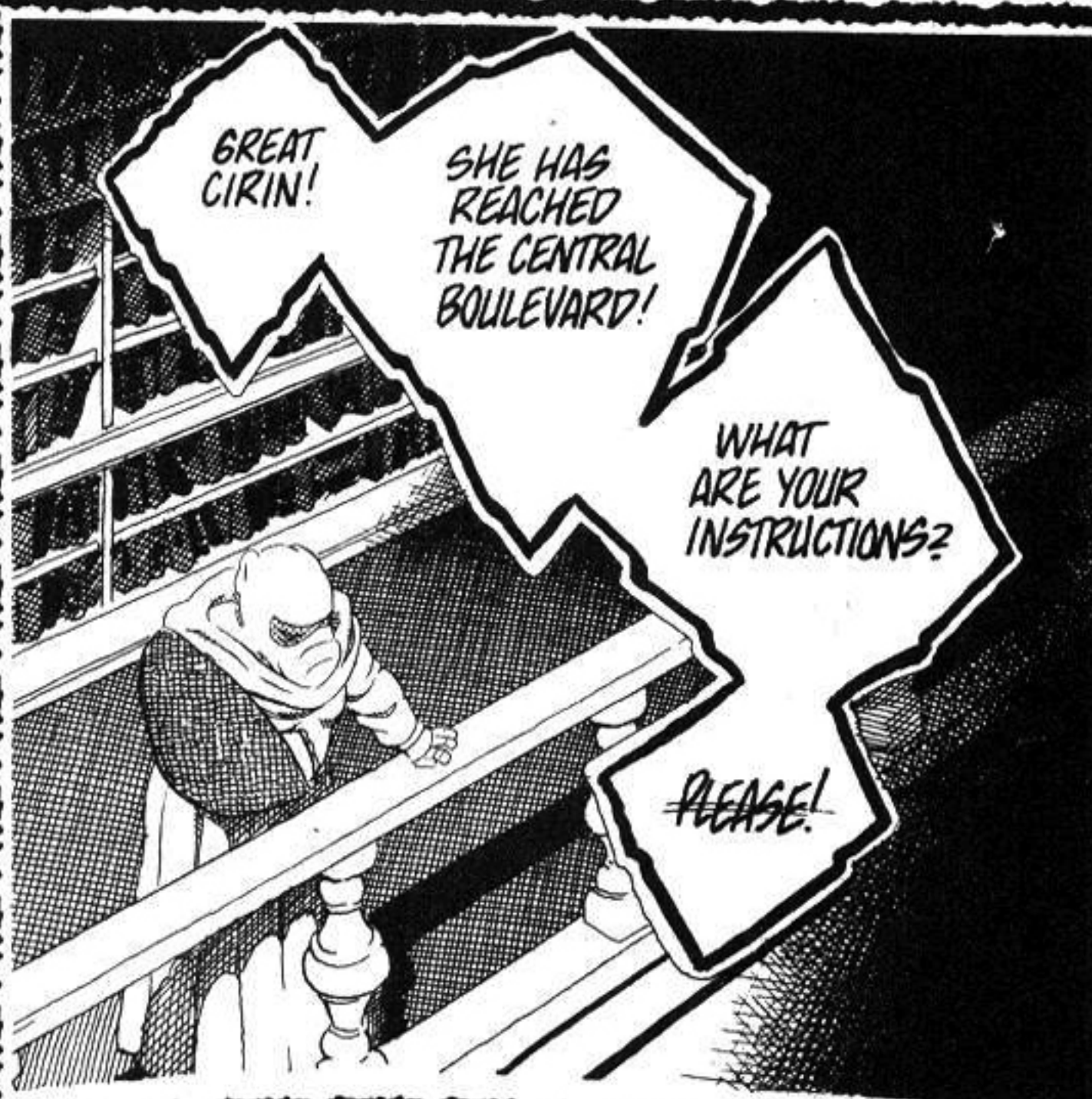
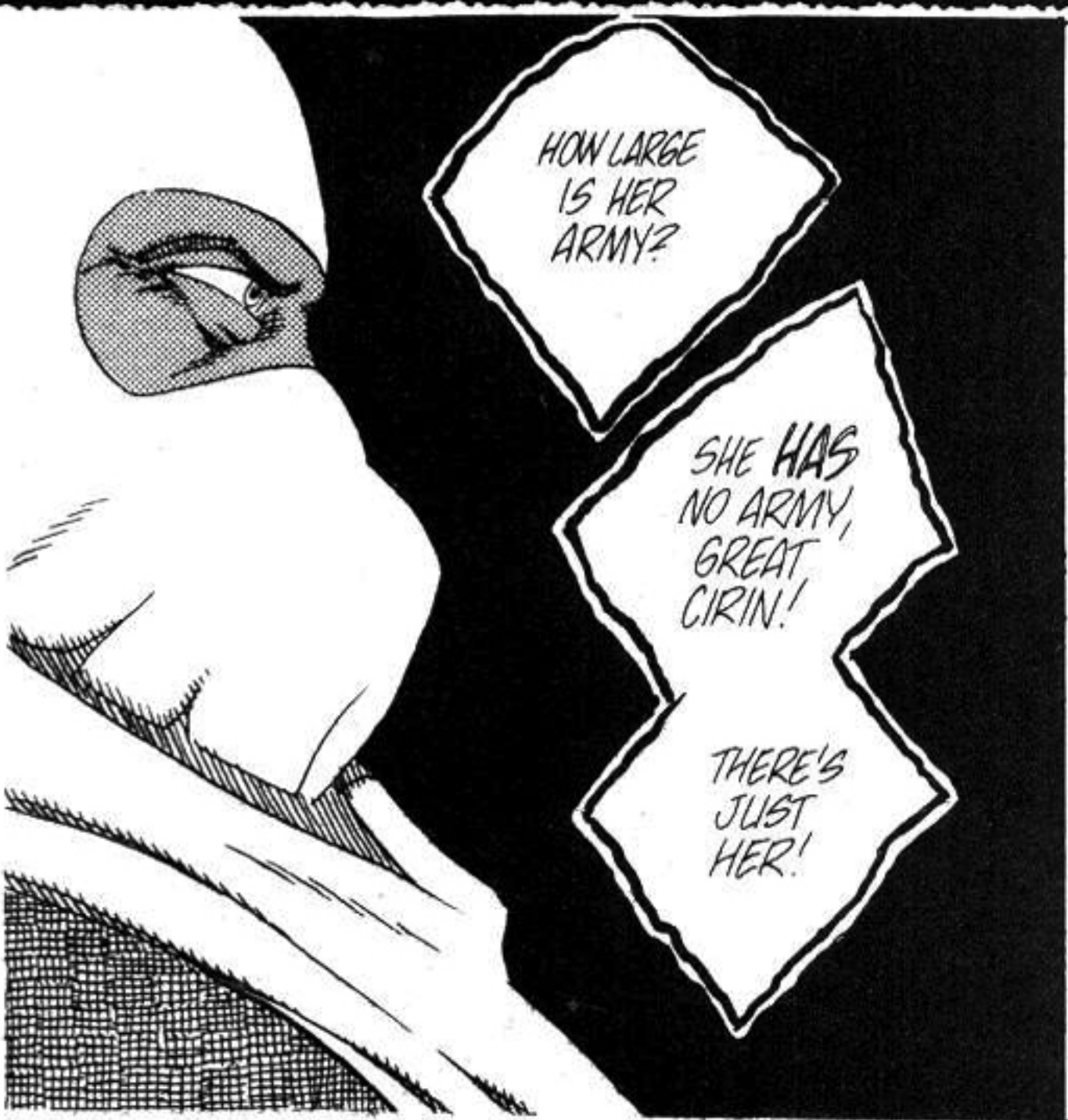
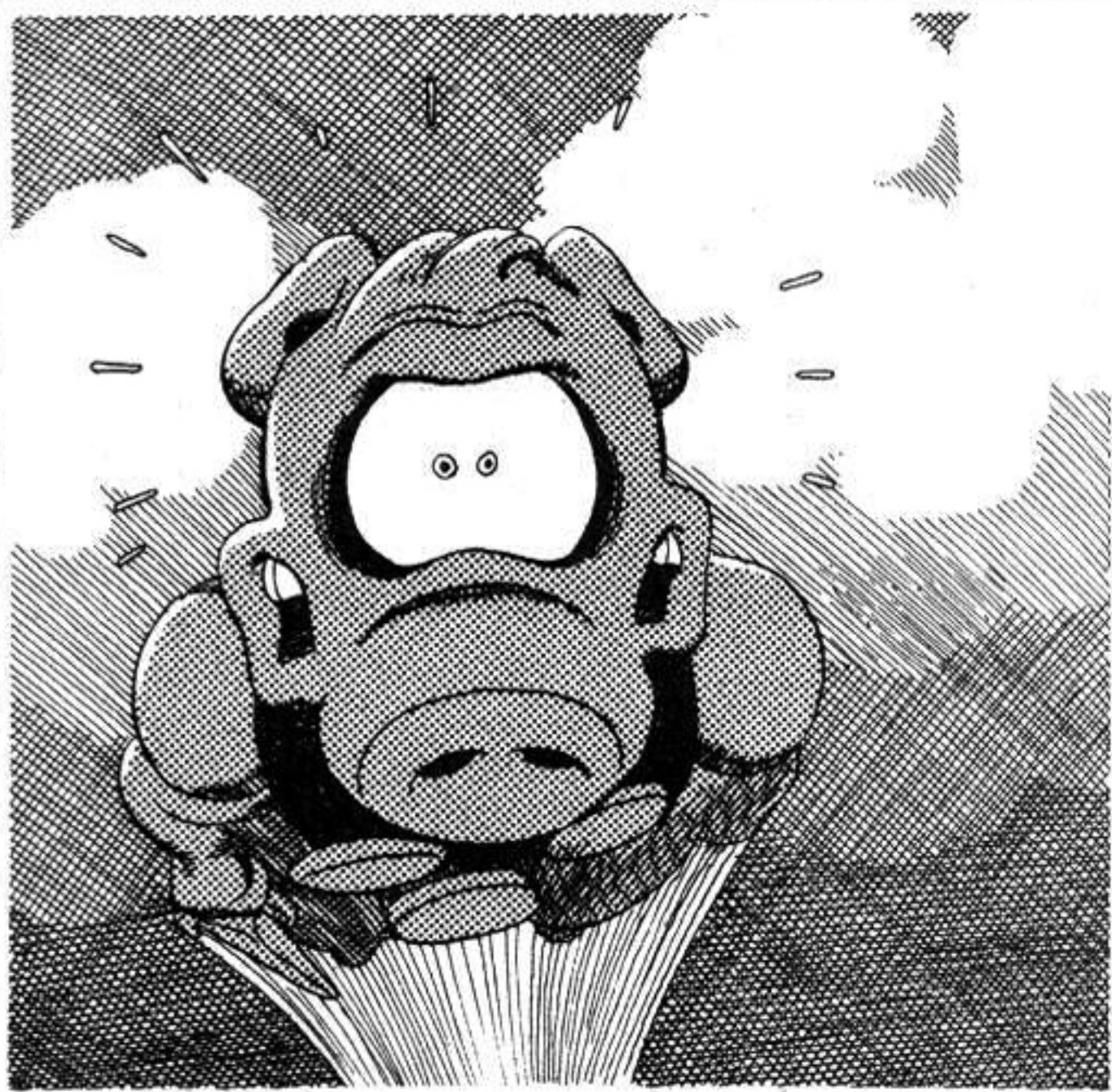


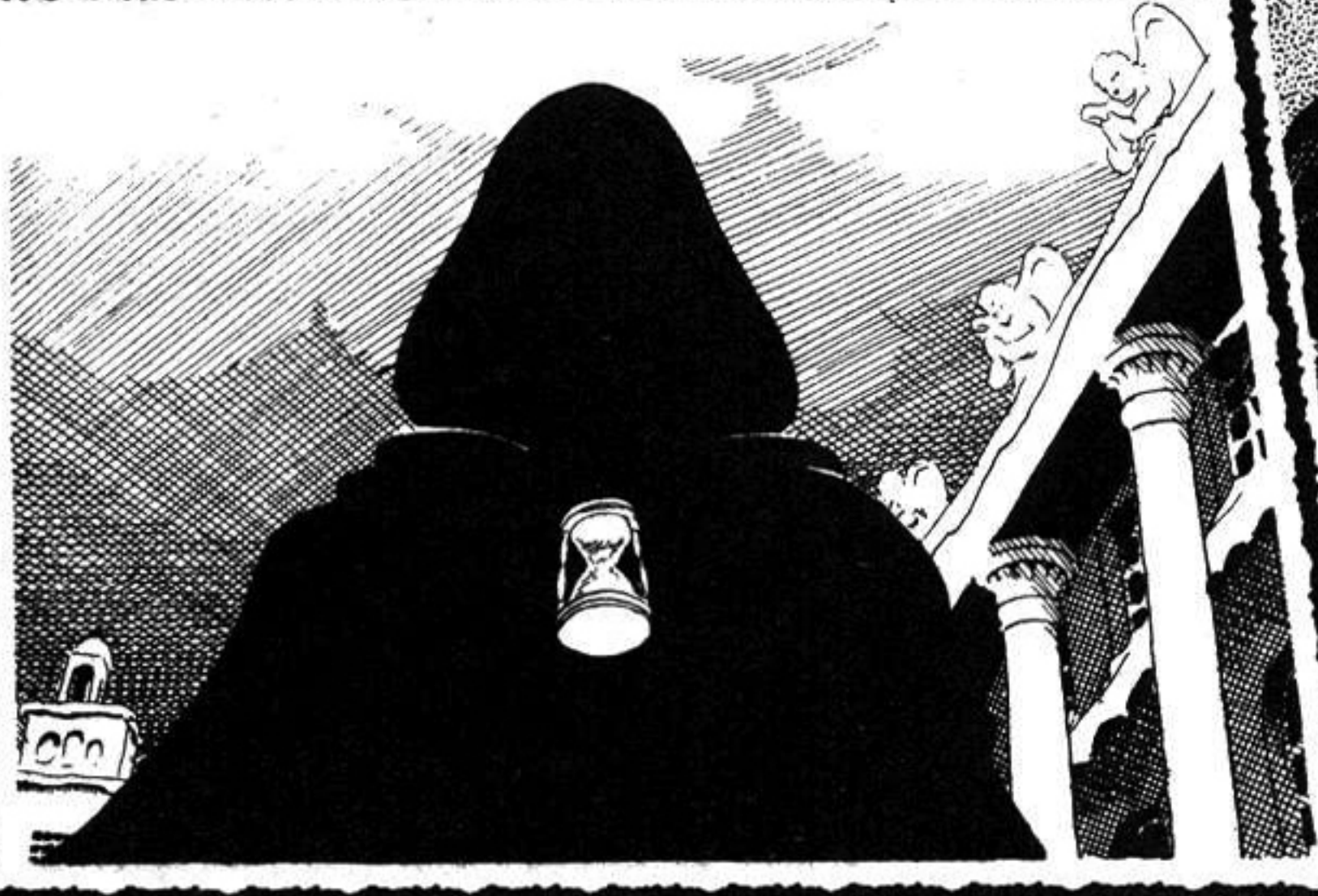
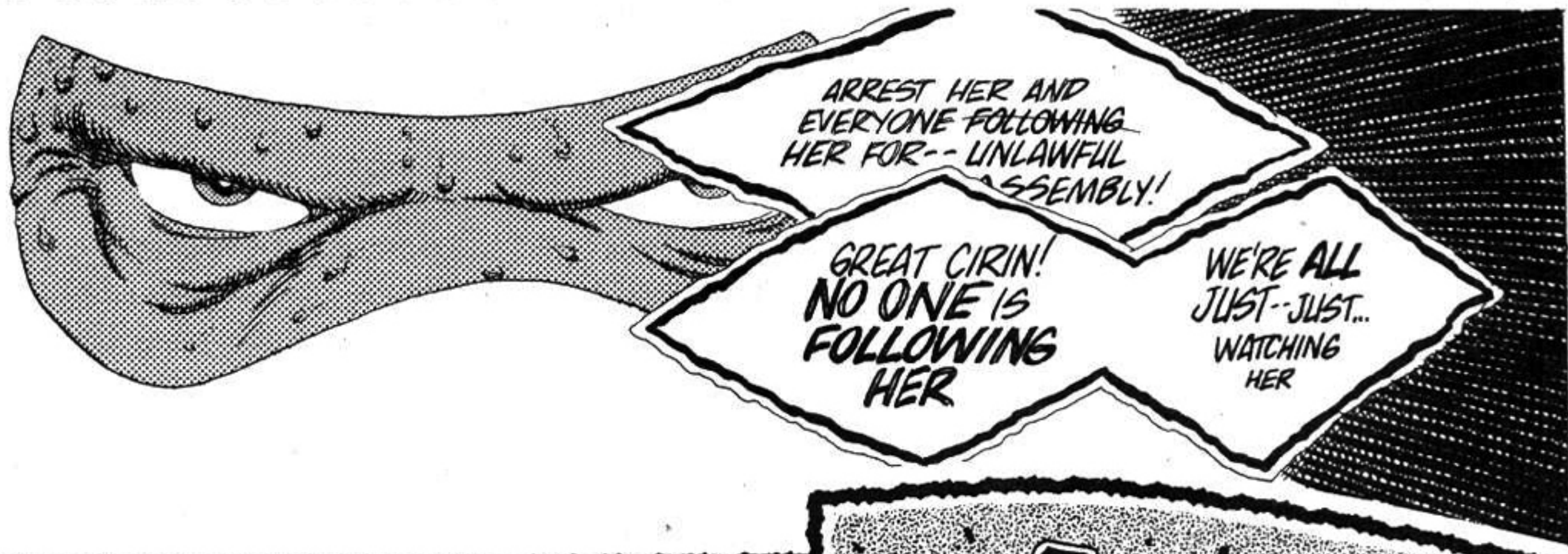
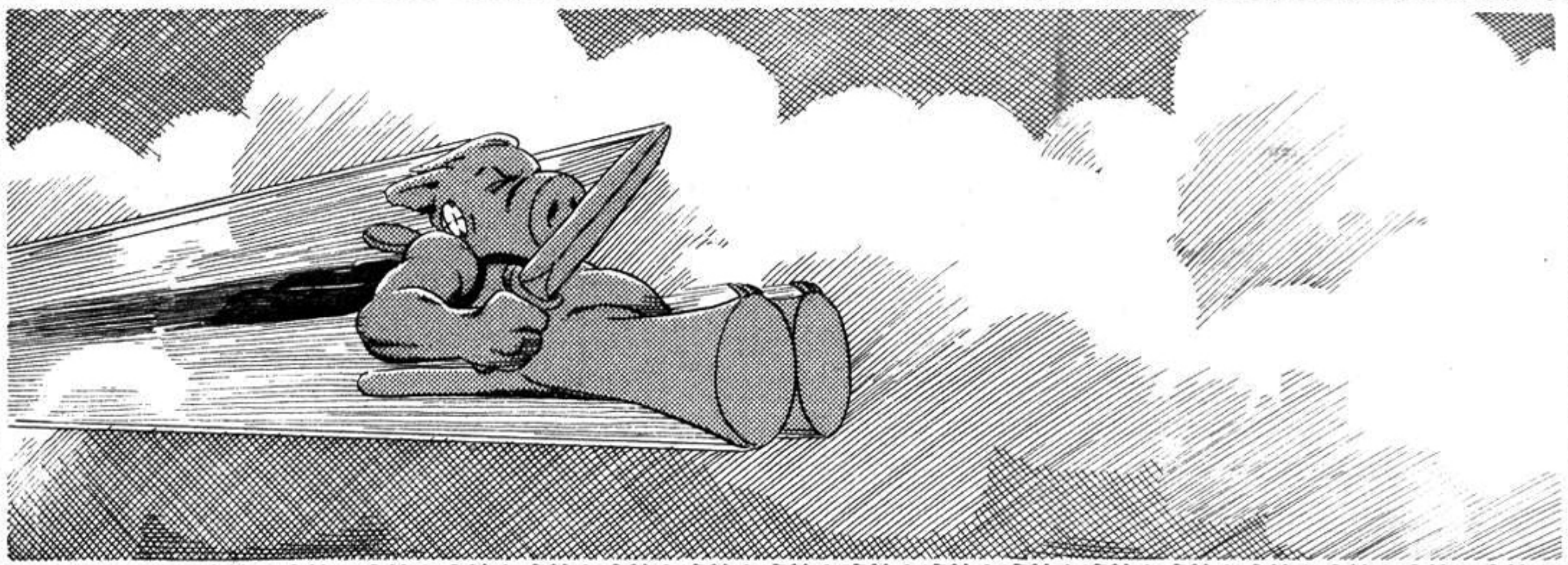


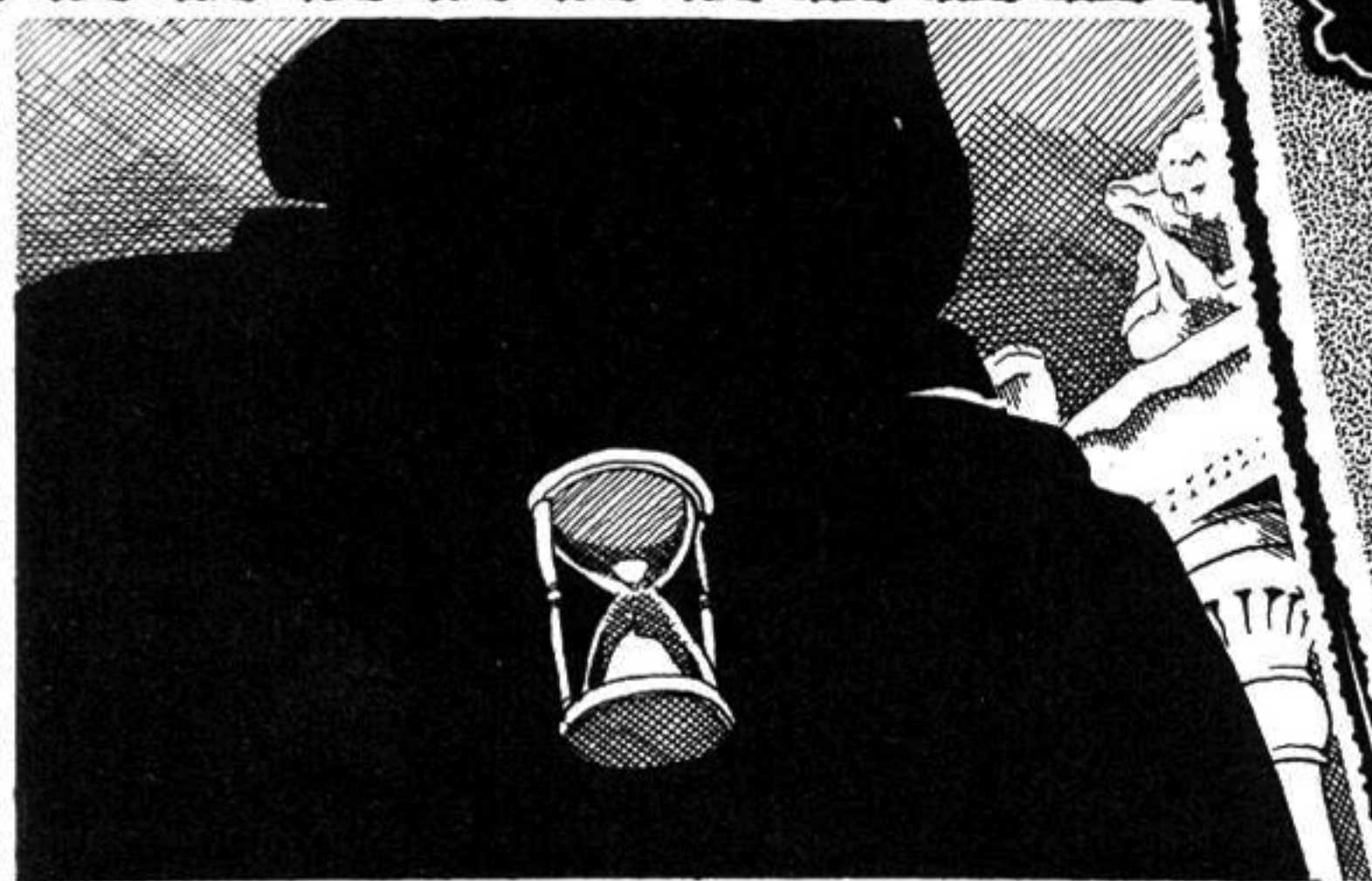
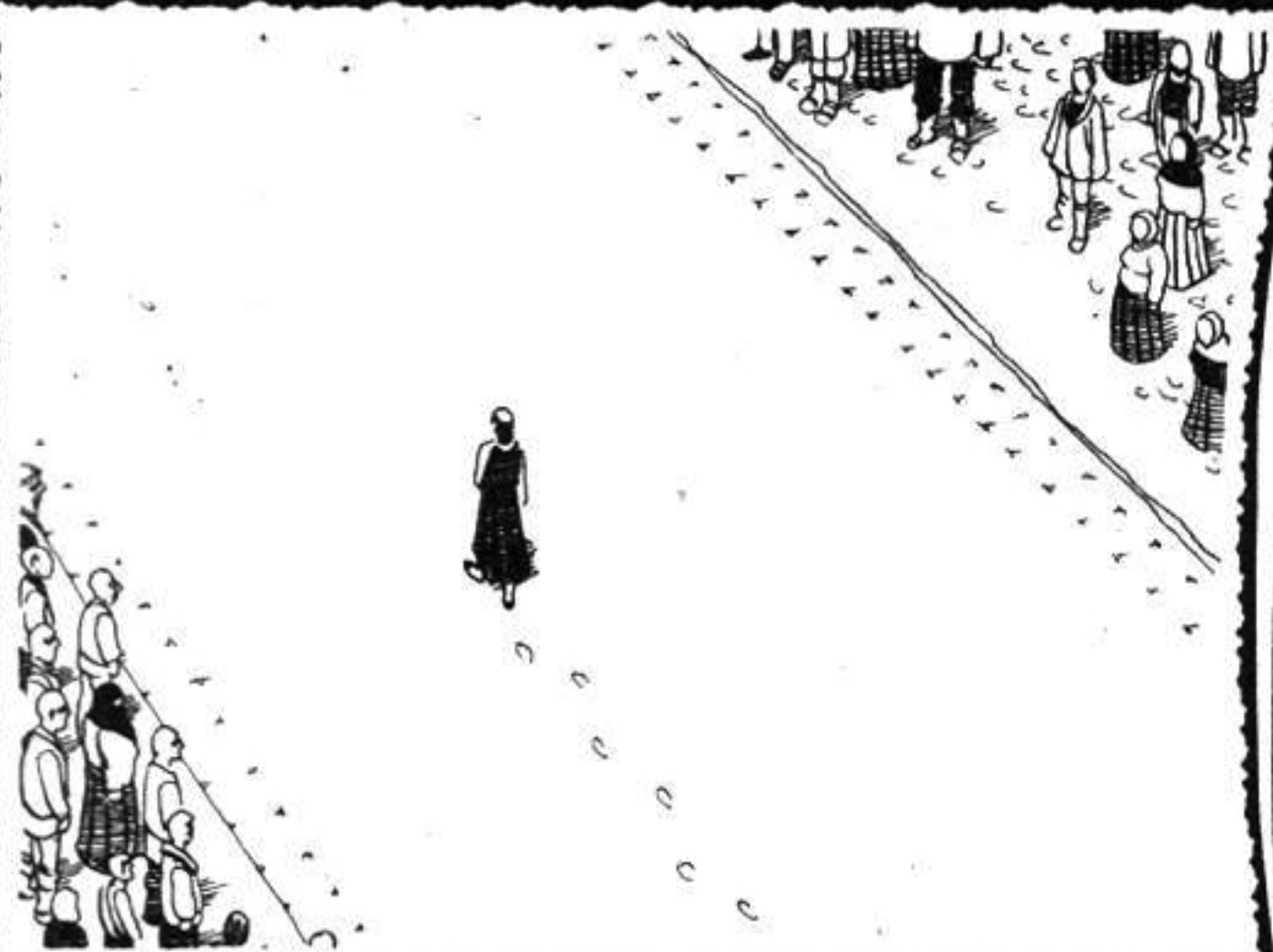
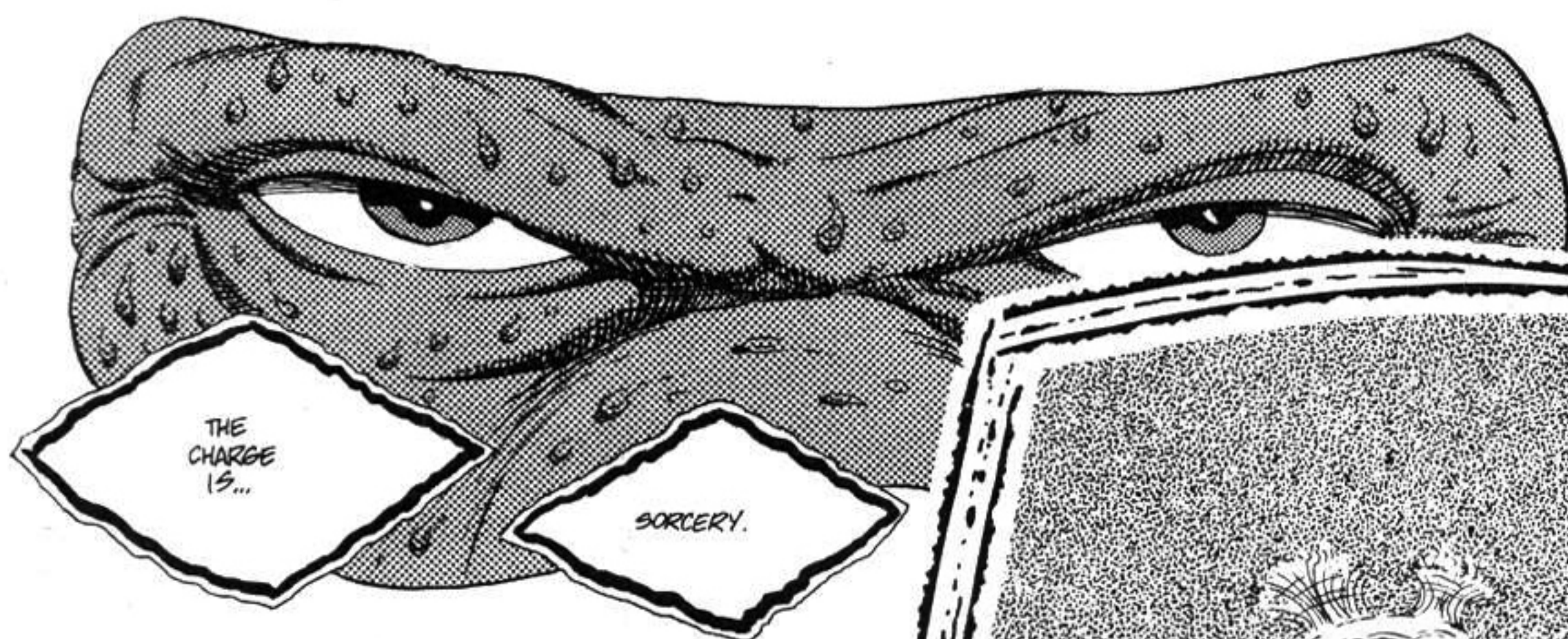
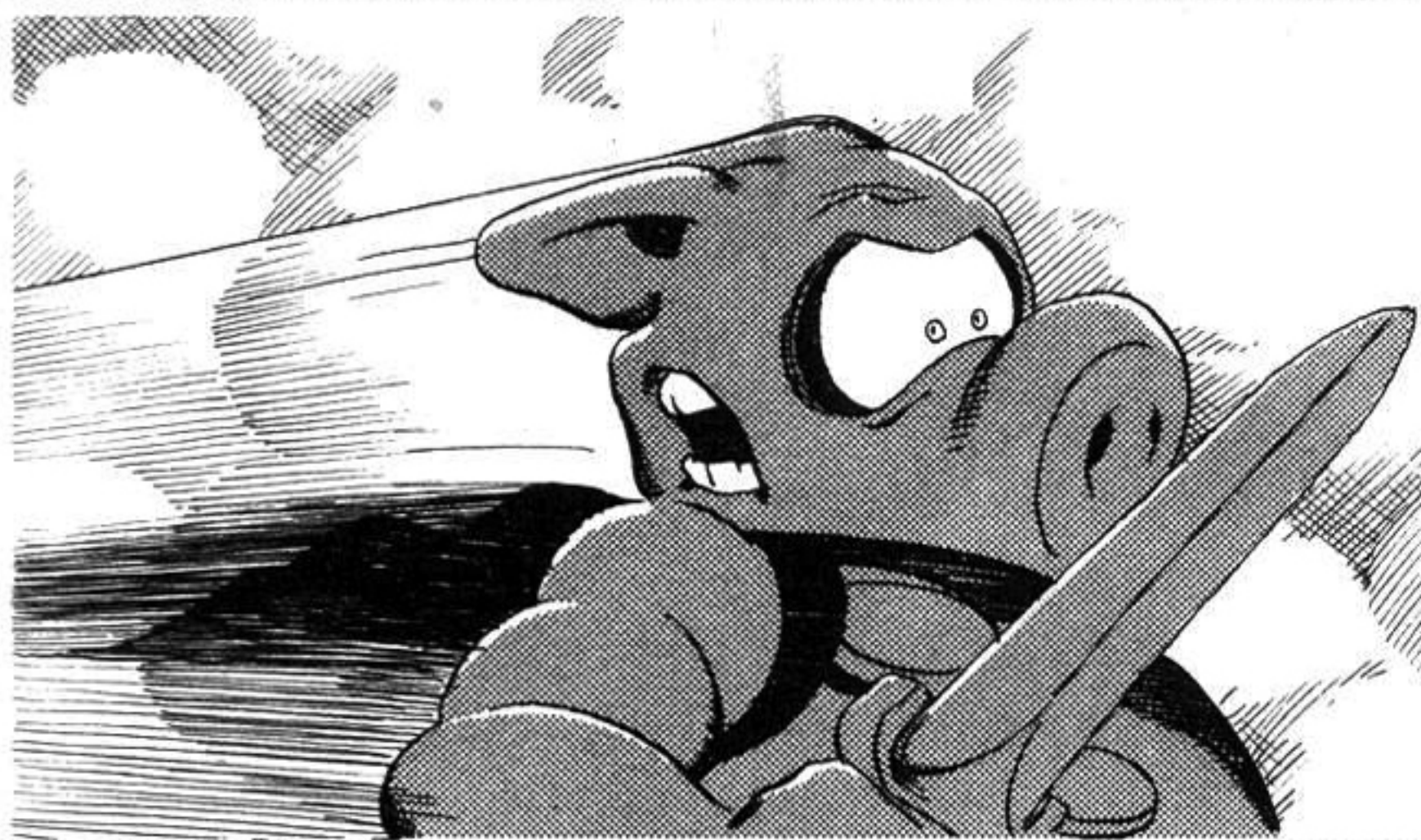


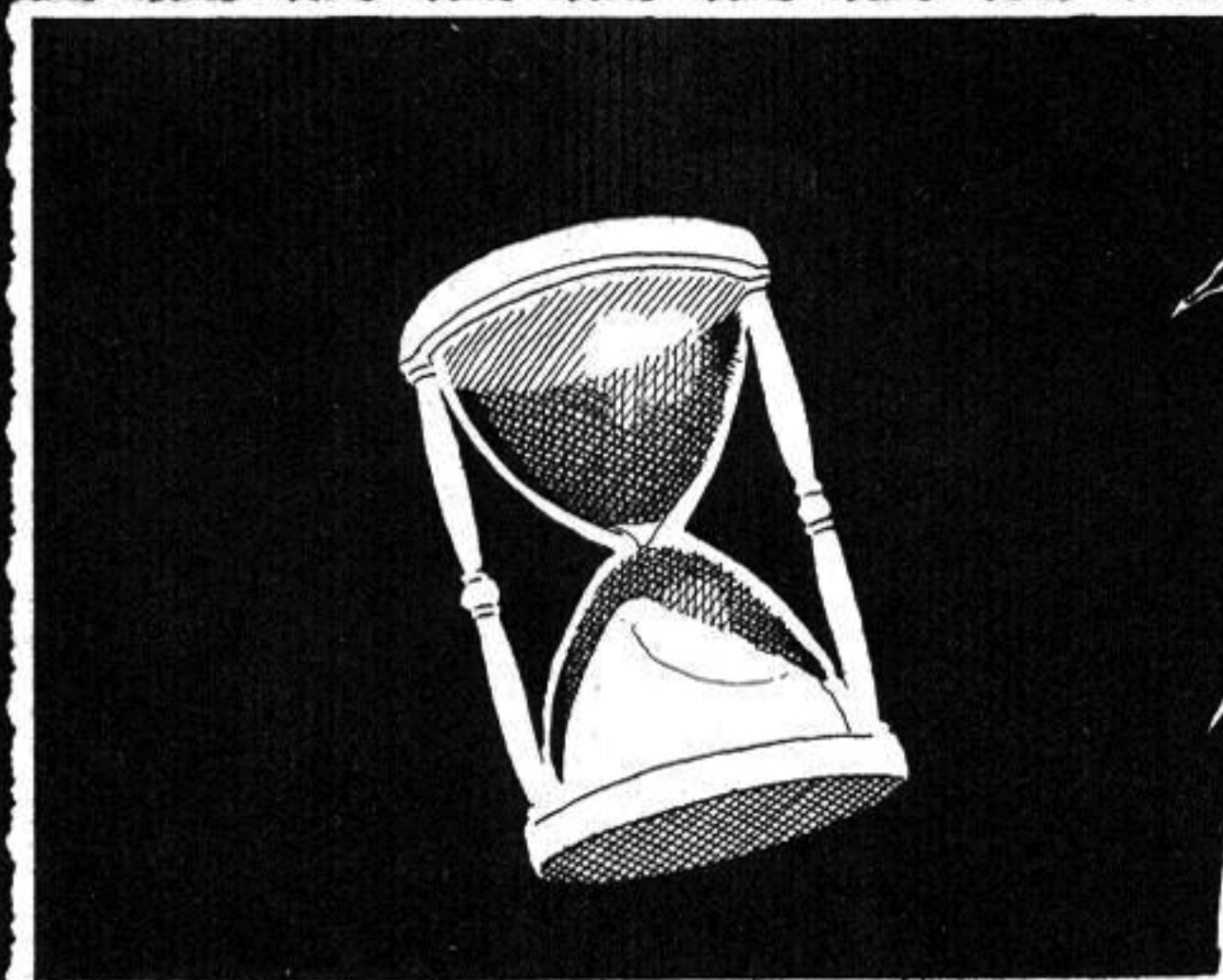
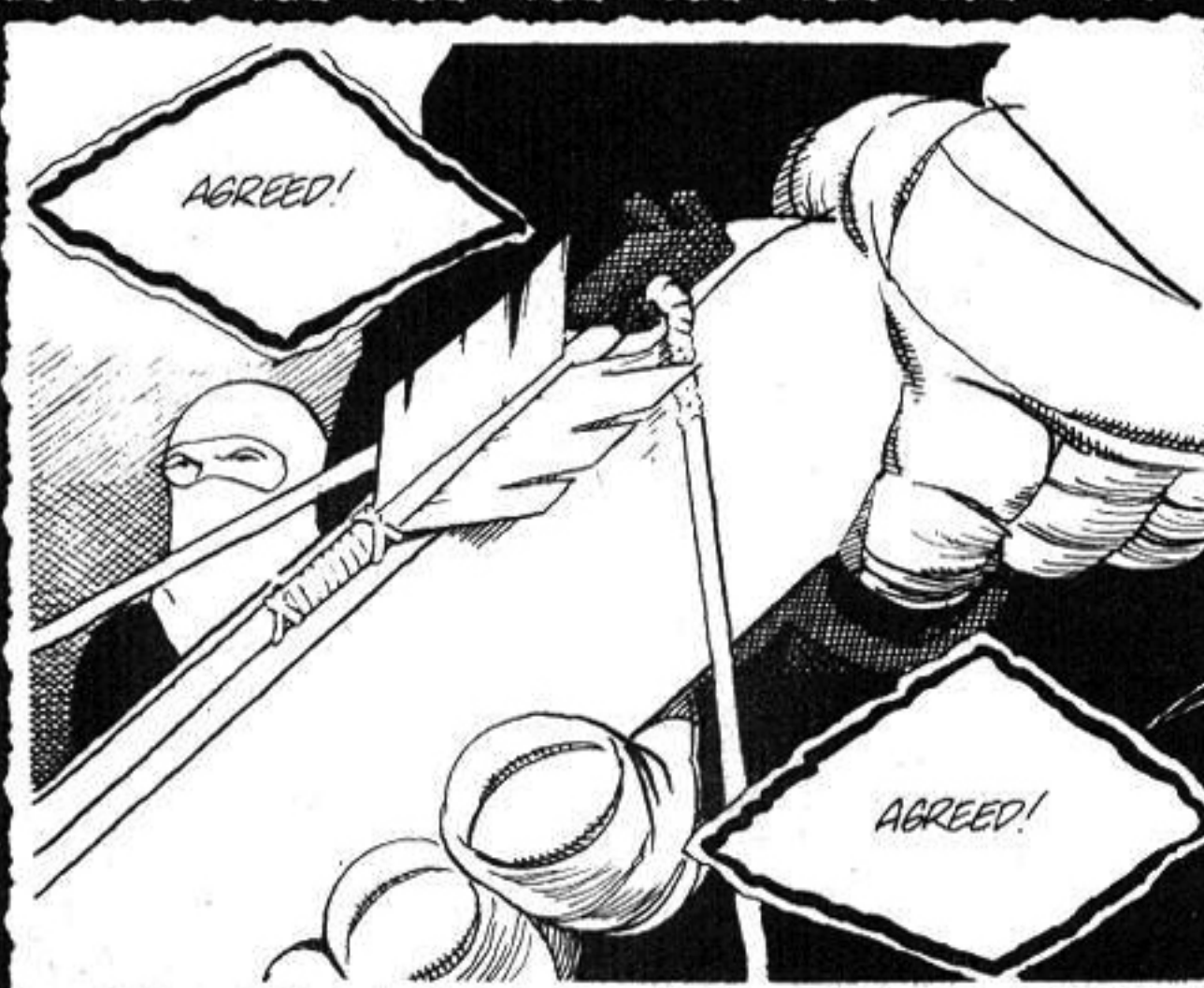














TOTAL
SELL-
THROUGH
ROACH™

MOORE-
GAIMAN
SIMROACH™

DIE
CLIT
ROACH™

STATIC
ROACH™

KAREN
BERGER
MYSTERY
THEATER
ROACH™

TRUE
CRIME
CARDS
ROACH™

GRENNEL
CROSS-
OVER
ROACH™

DEFIANT
ROACH™

KNIGHTFALL
ROACH™

HARDWARE
ROACH™

VALIANT
ROACH™

DEATHMATE
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HARDCASE
ROACH™

VOID
ROACH™

VOIDOID
ROACH™

FOIL
ROACH™

BANE
ROACH™

PLASMROACH™
WILL NEVER BE
GOREROACH™
FOR YOUR
ORGRACH™

PLASM
ROACH
2099™

COLOUR
GEORGE
REEVES
ROACH™

TUROK
ROACH™

PITT
ROACH™

SKYBOX
ROACH™

CARD
SCUM
ROACH™

MAXX
ROACH™

ICON
ROACH™

COMICS'
GREATEST
ROACH™
(JUST SIGN
HERE)™

MAXIMUM
CARNAGE
ROACH™

MILESTONE
ROACH
NOBODY MOVES 'TIL
I FIND MY TRADEMARK

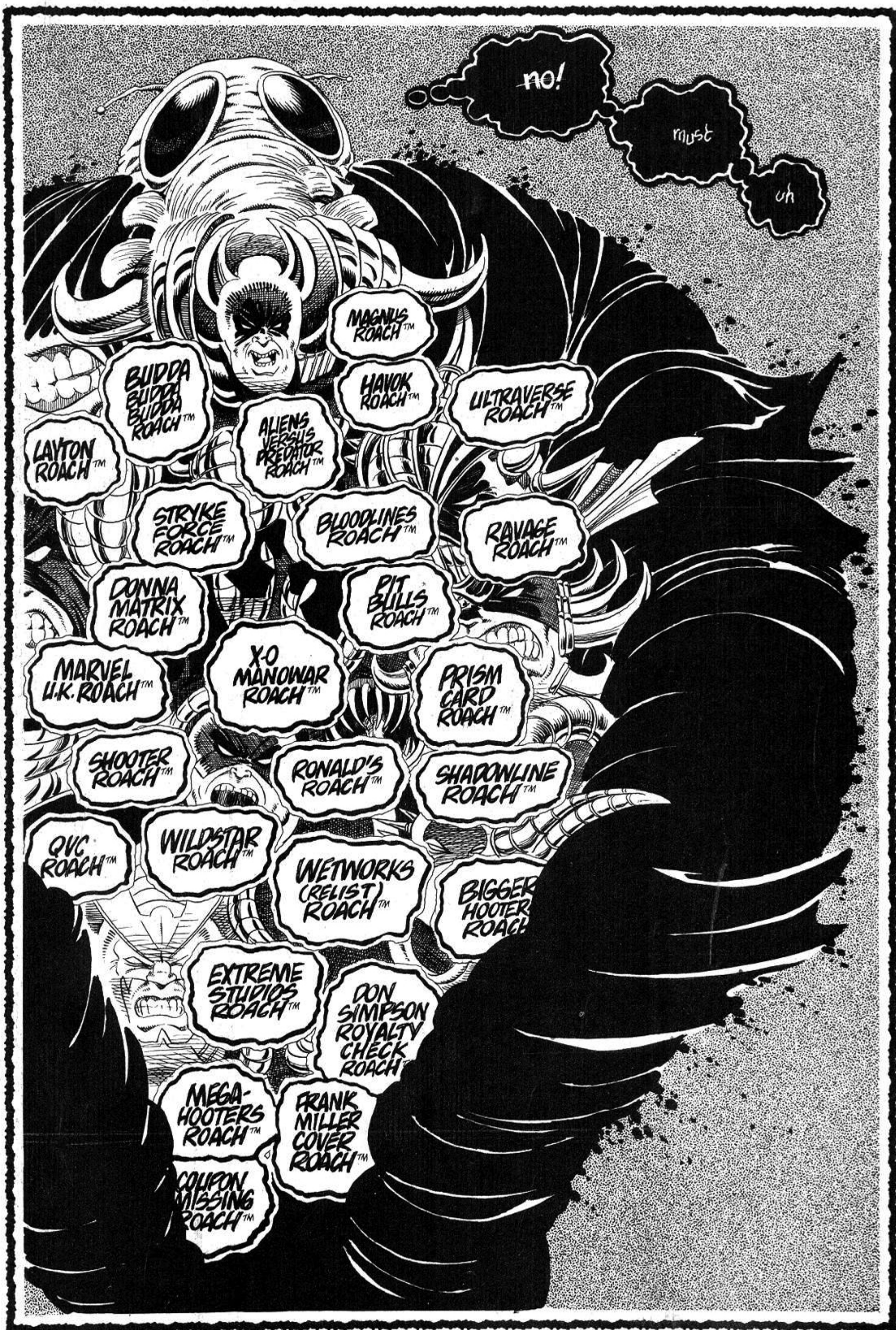
PRIME
ROACH™

TOPPS
ROACH™

LIEFIELD
NOLIN
ROACH™

FULLY-
RETURNABLE
ROACH™

BIG
HOOTERS
ROACH™



no!

must

uh

MAGNUS
ROACH™

HAVOK
ROACH™

ULTRAVERSE
ROACH™

BUDDA
BUDDA
BUDDA
ROACH™

ALIENS
VERSUS
PREDATOR
ROACH™

LAYTON
ROACH™

STRYKE
FORCE
ROACH™

BLOODLINES
ROACH™

RAVAGE
ROACH™

DONNA
MATRIX
ROACH™

PIT
BULLS
ROACH™

MARVEL
U.K. ROACH™

X-O
MANOWAR
ROACH™

PRISM
CARD
ROACH™

SHOOTER
ROACH™

RONALD'S
ROACH™

SHADOWLINE
ROACH™

QVC
ROACH™

WILDSTAR
ROACH™

NETWORKS
(RELIST)
ROACH™

BIGGER
HOOTER
ROACH™

EXTREME
STUDIOS
ROACH™

DON
SIMPSON
ROYALTY
CHECK
ROACH™

MEGA-
HOOTERS
ROACH™

FRANK
MILLER
COVER
ROACH™

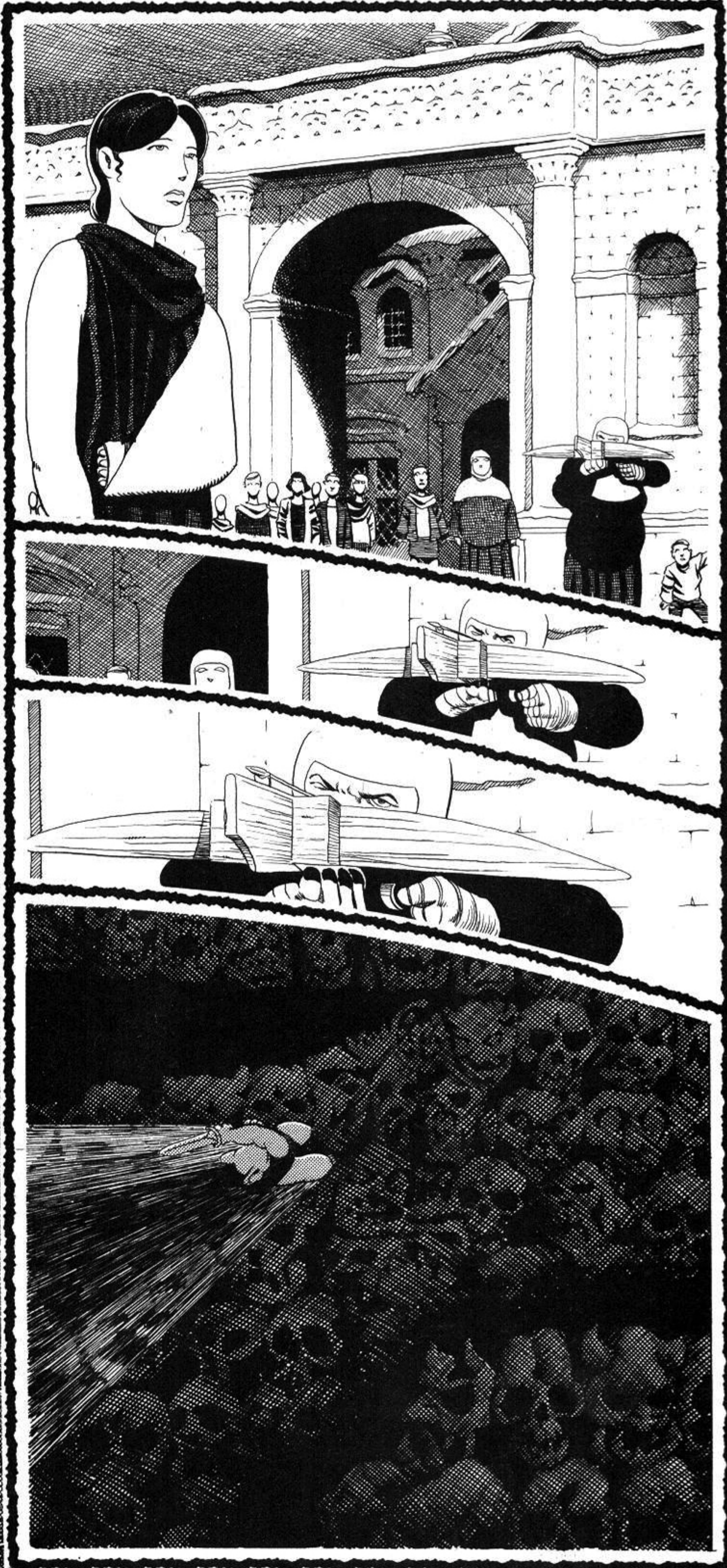
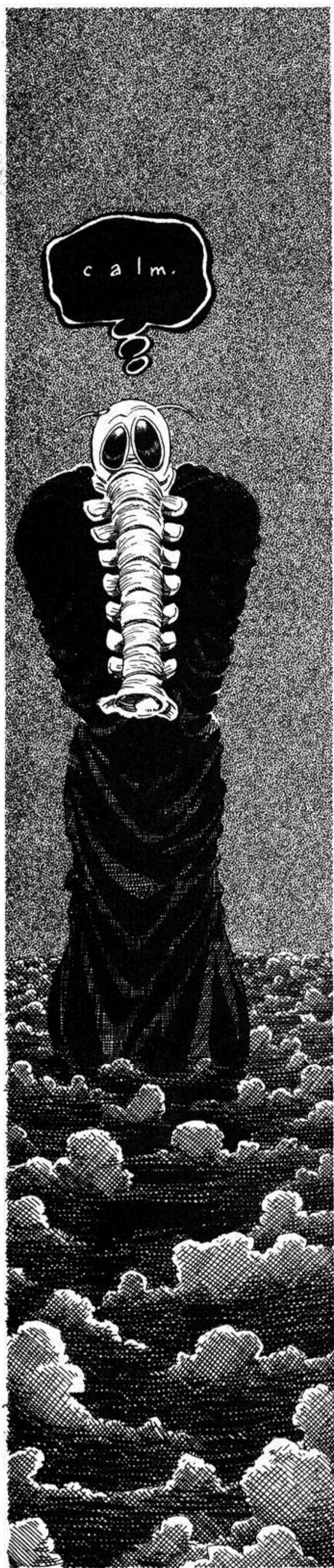
COUPON
MISSING
ROACH™

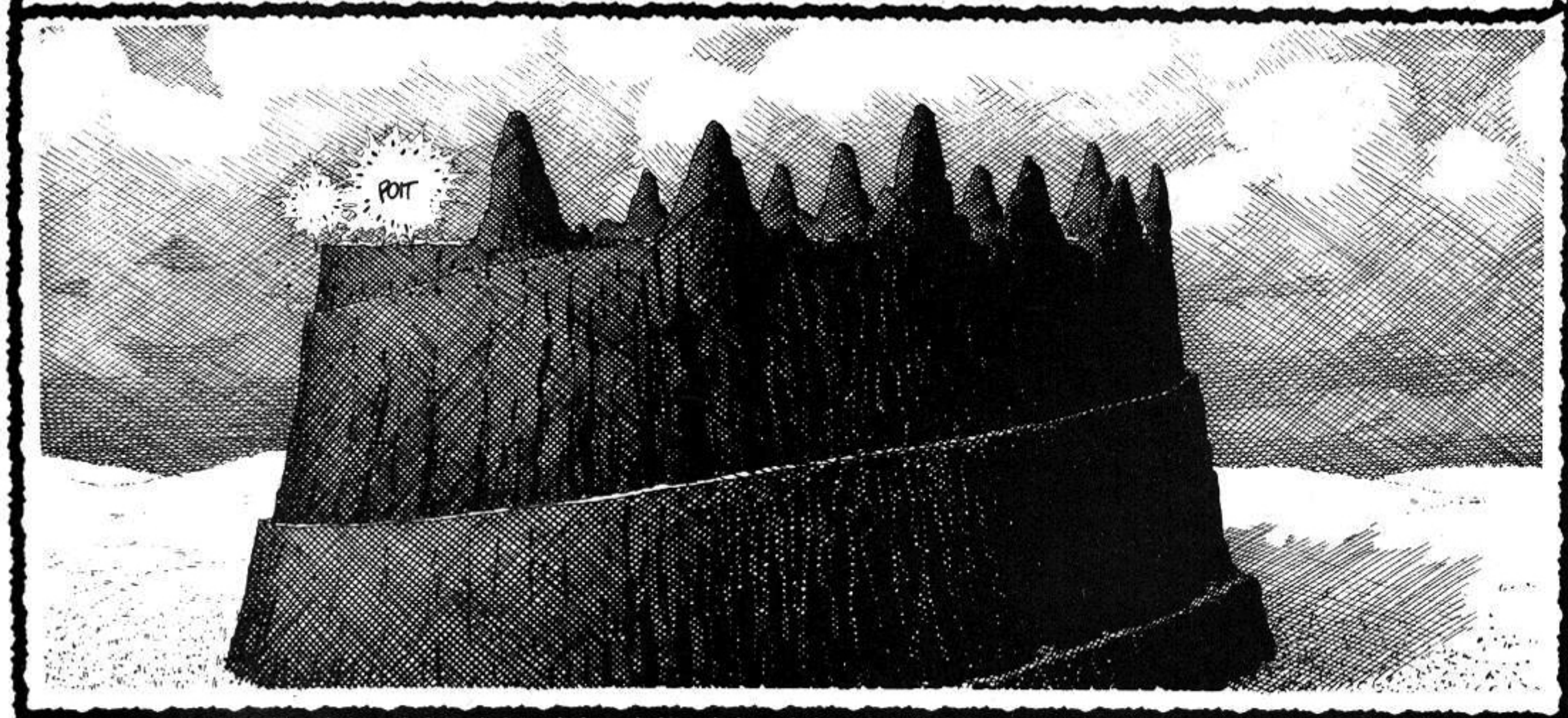
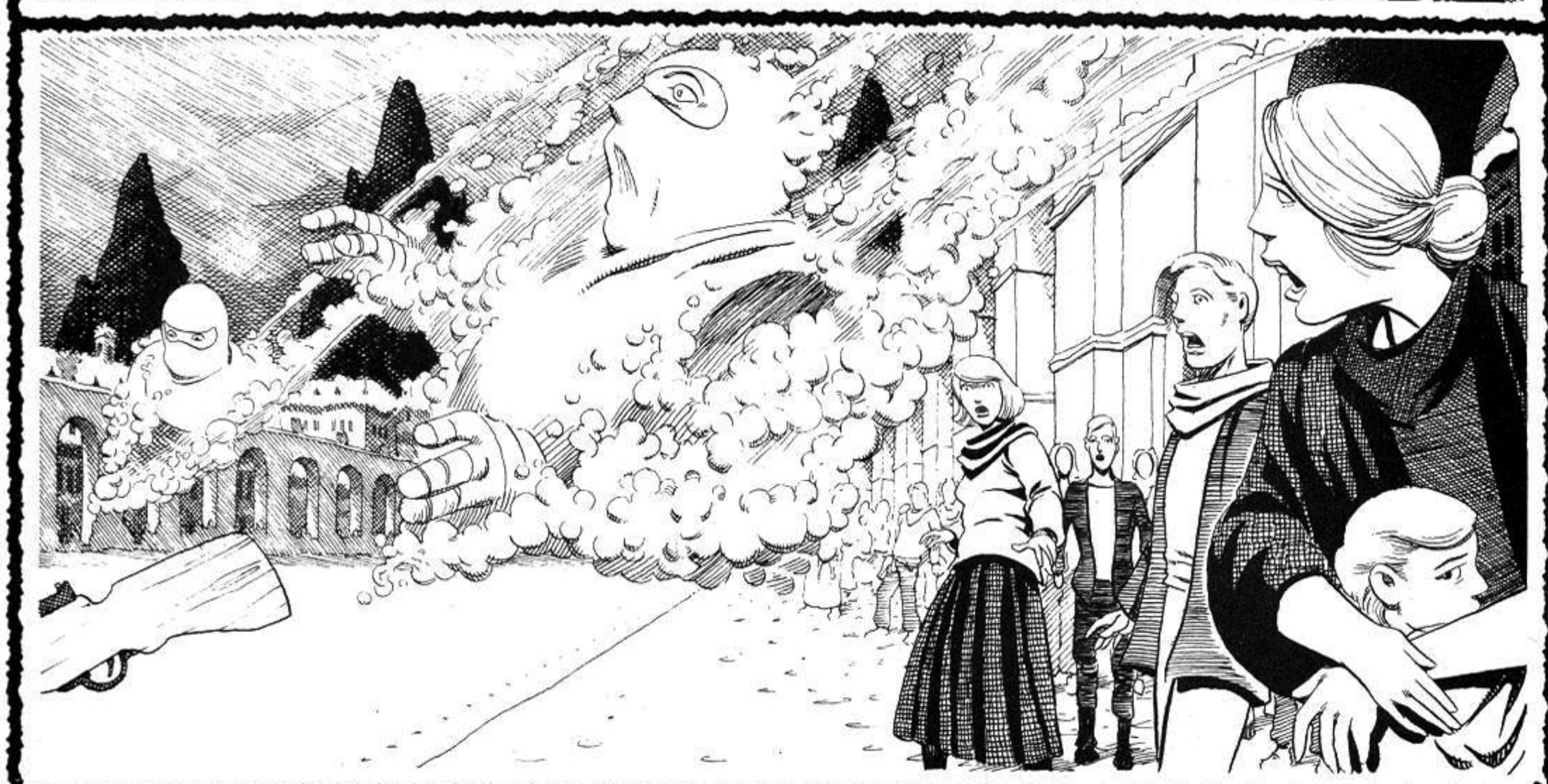
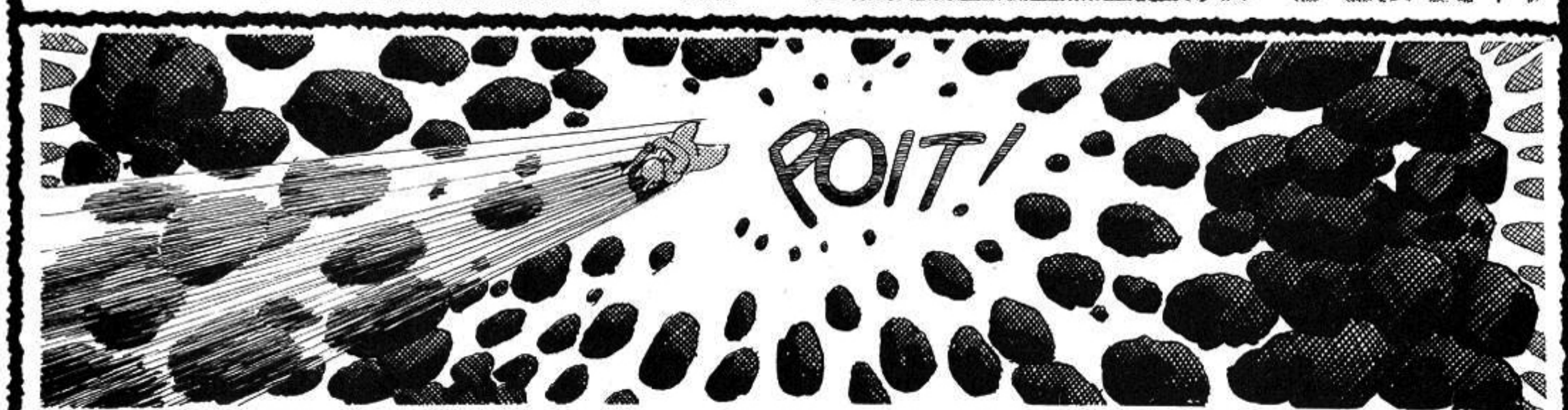
must contain them

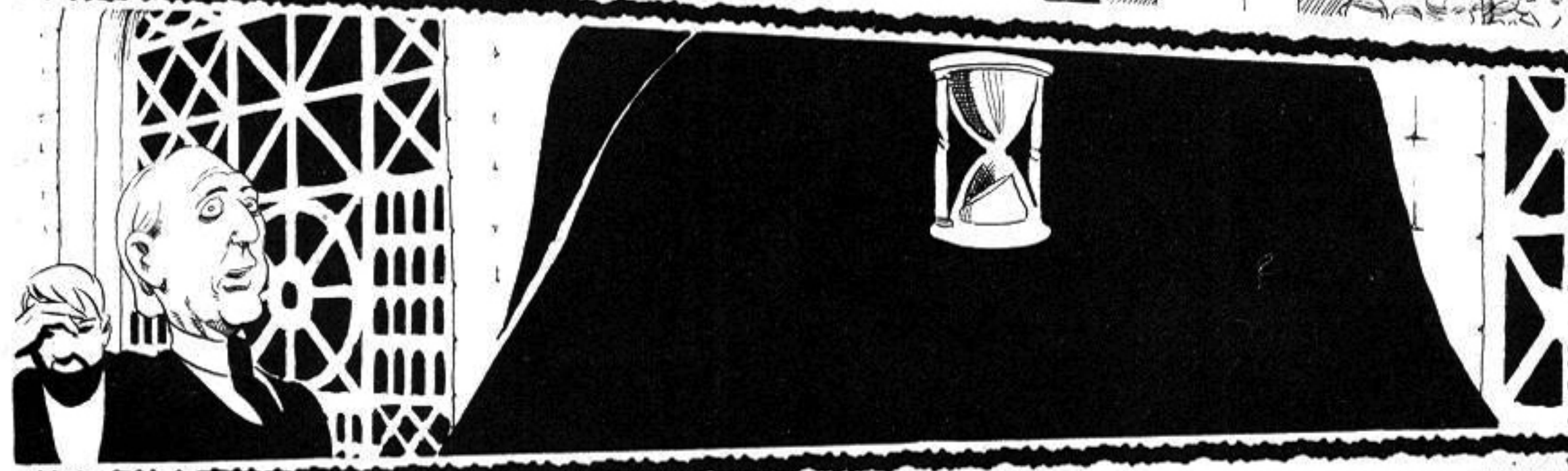
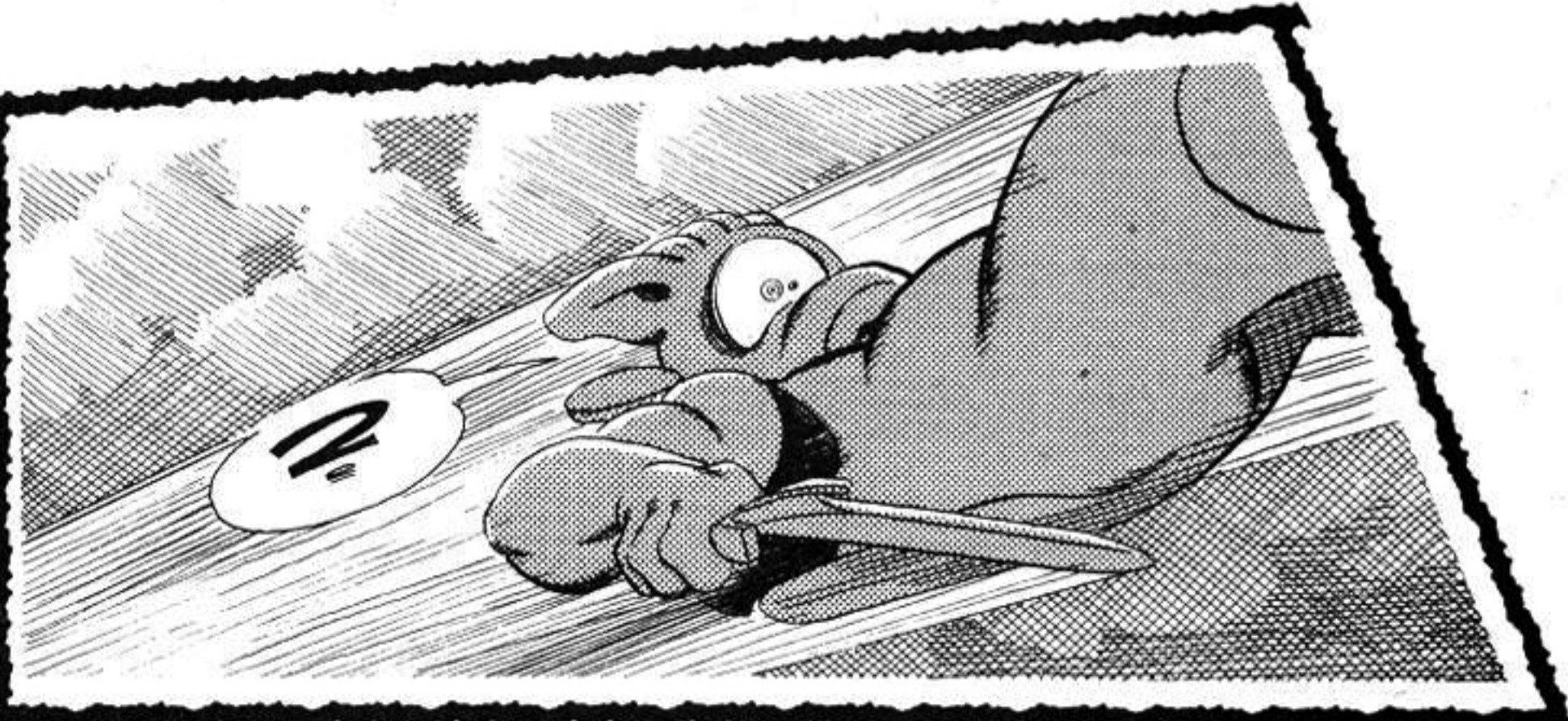


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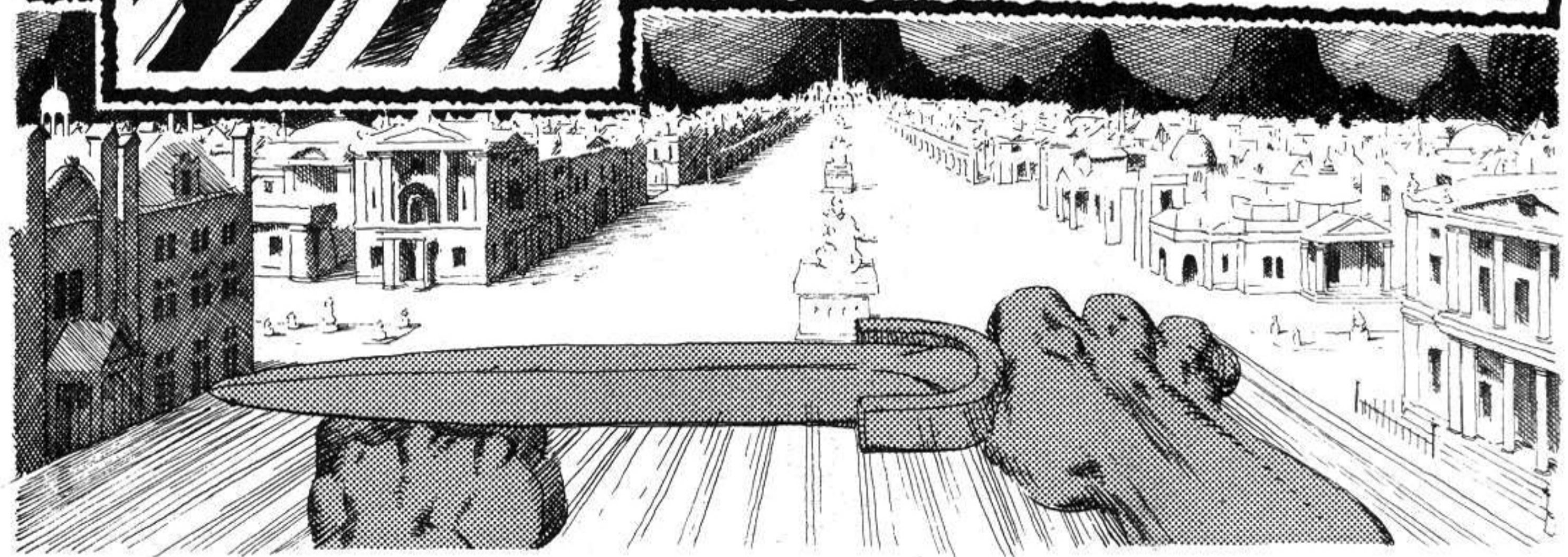


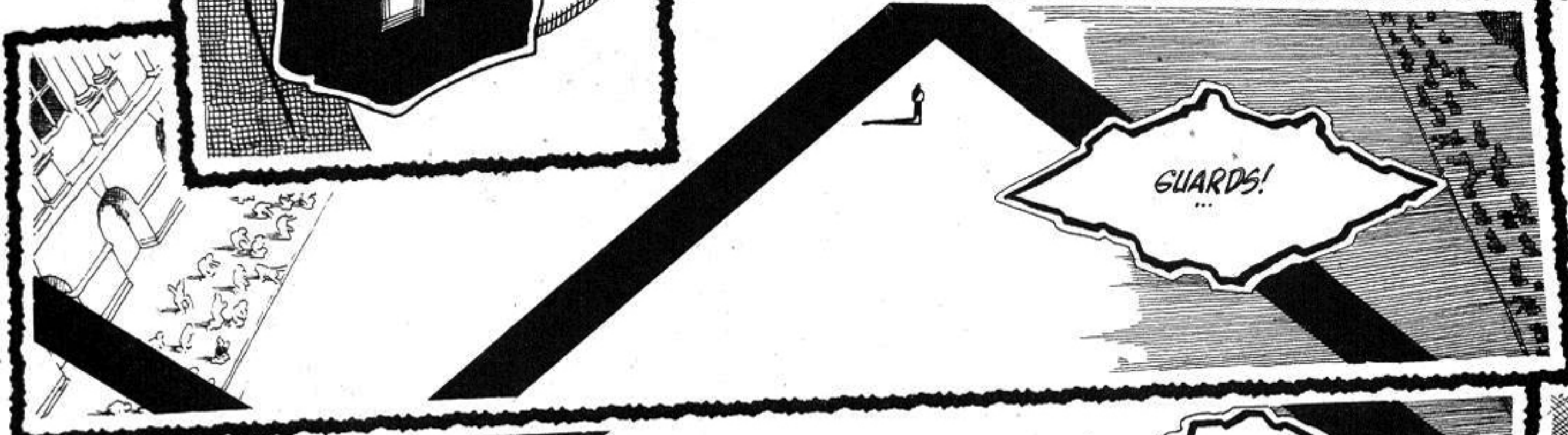
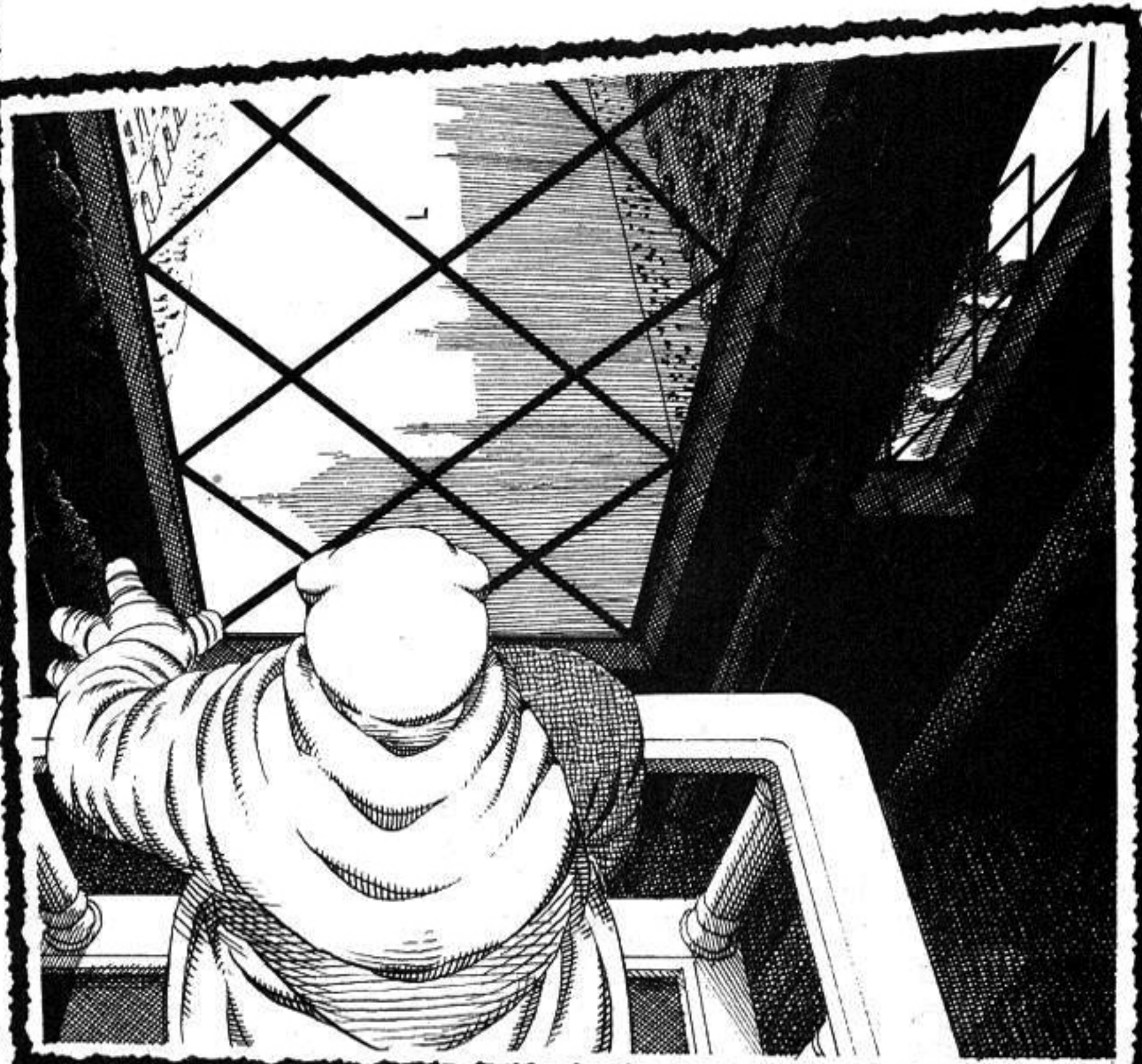








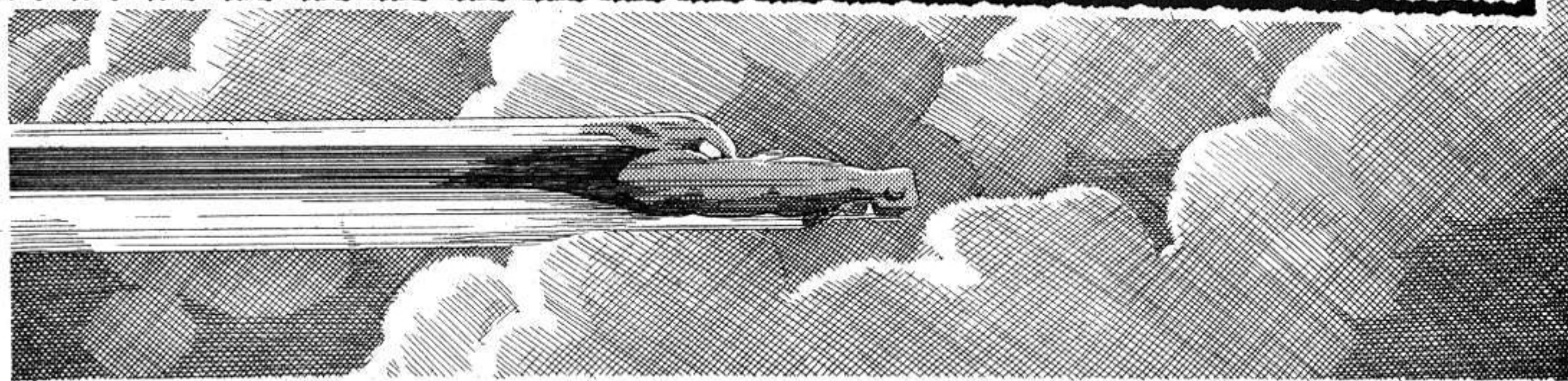




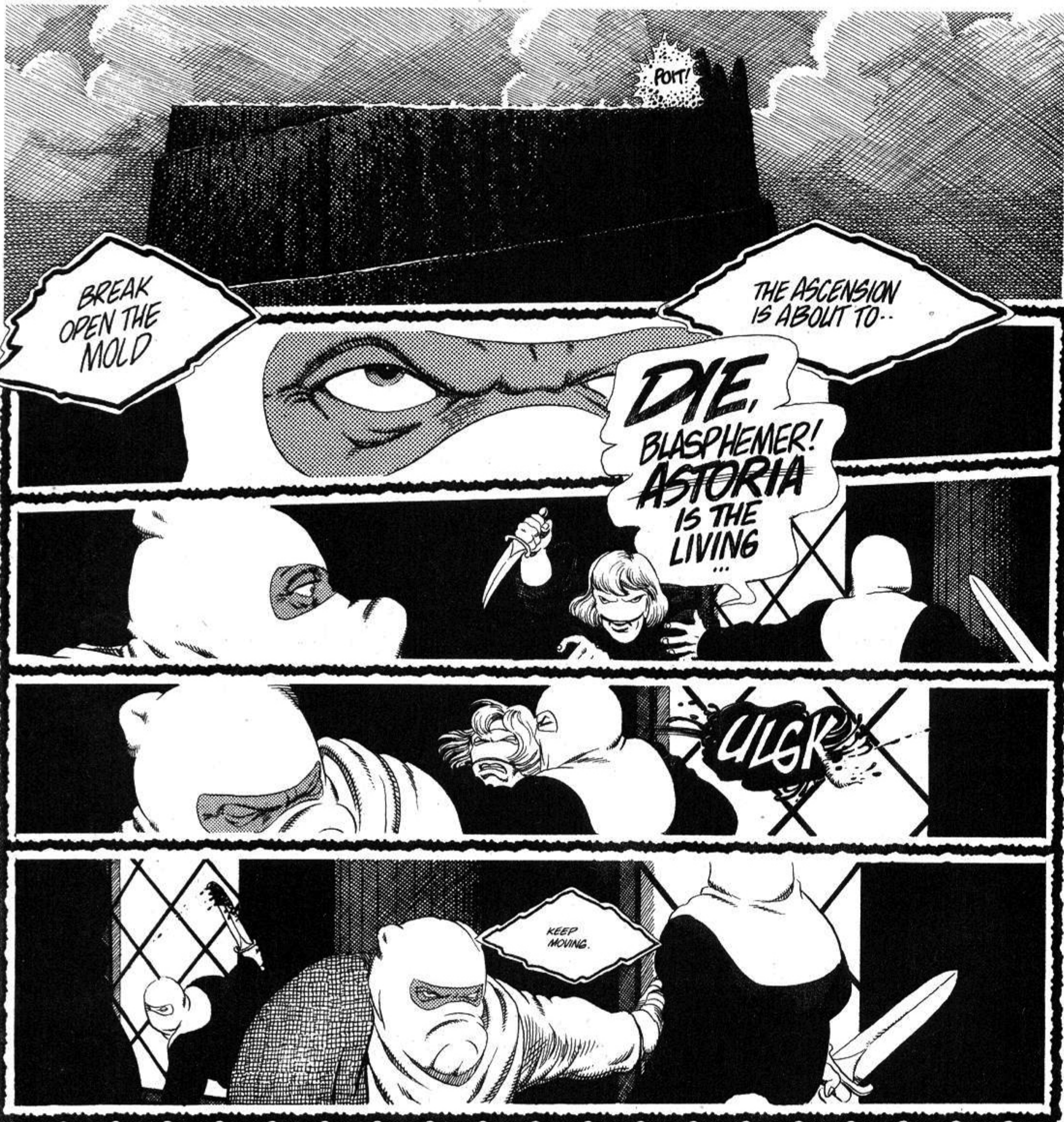
GUARDS!
...



GUARDS!
...



POIT POIT POIT POIT POIT



POUF

POIT!

HAS THE MOLD
BEEN OPENED?!
WE'RE... ALMOST

GREAT CIRIN!
ONE SIDE OF THE
SPHERE... IT
IT'S COLLAPSED

THE-- THE
SPHERE

IT'S...

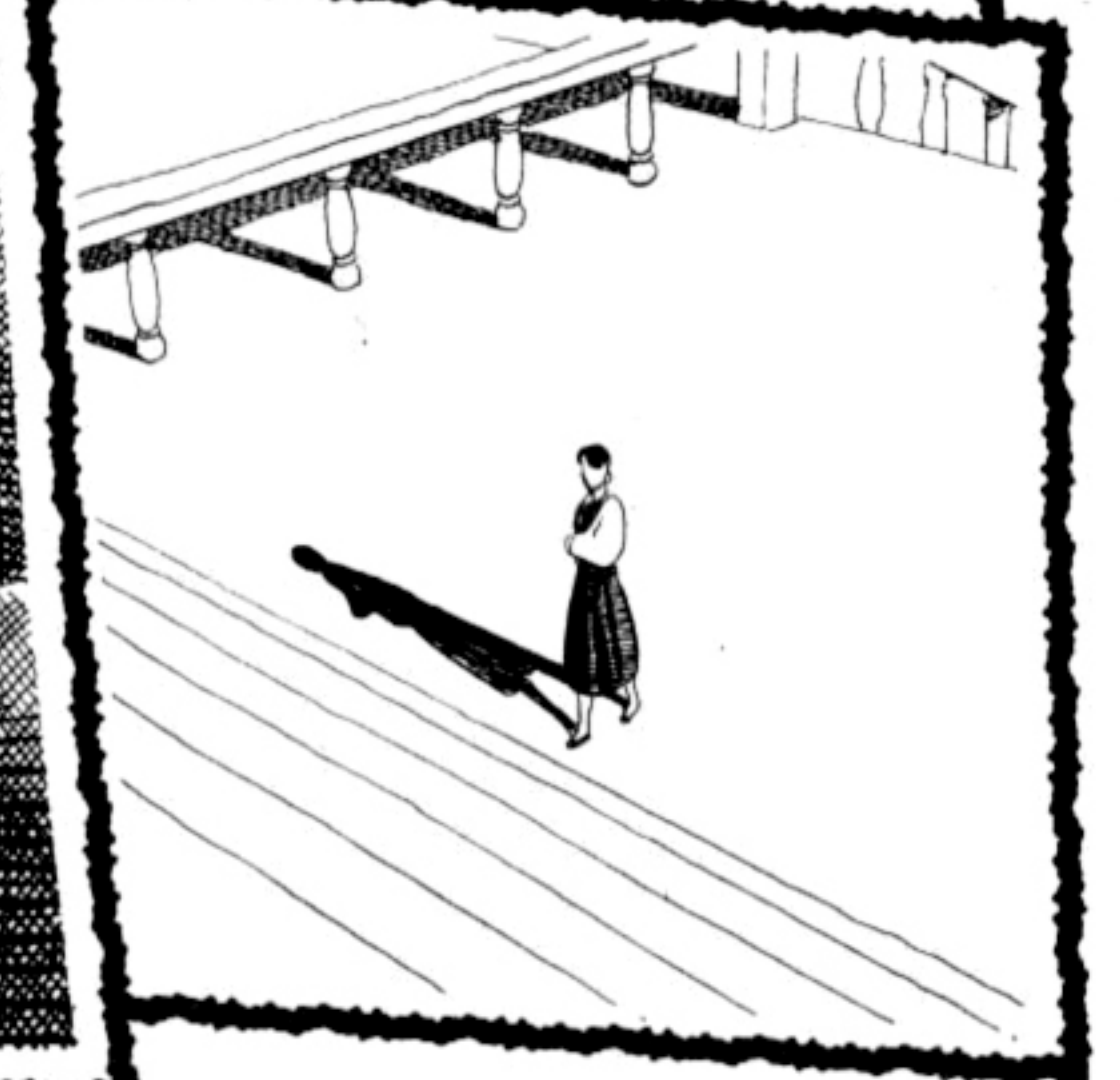
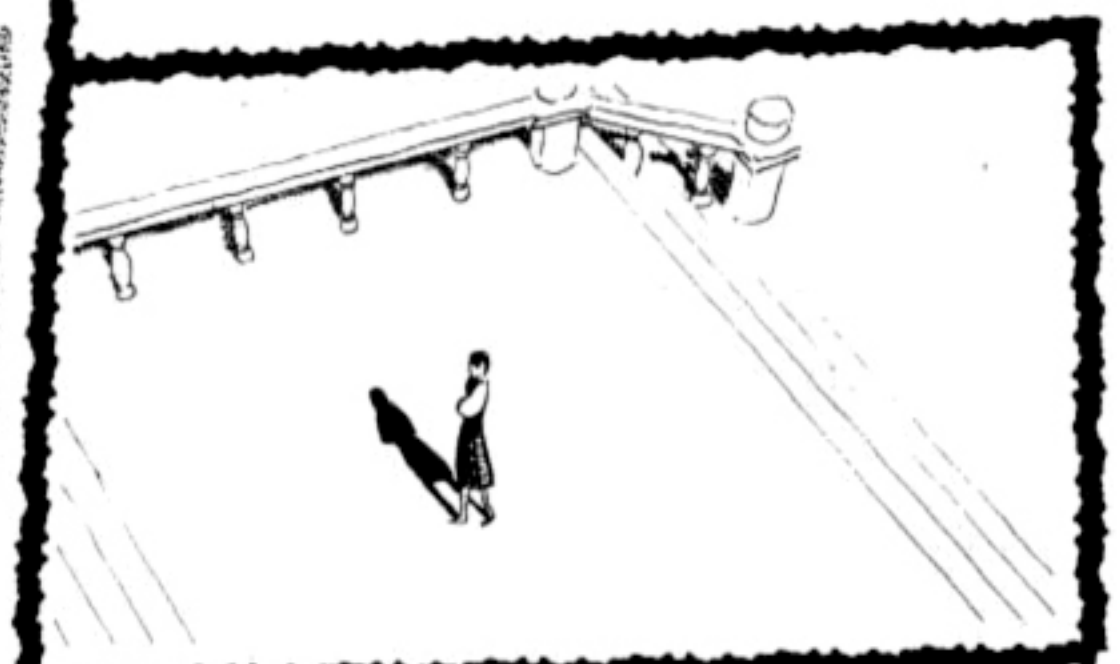
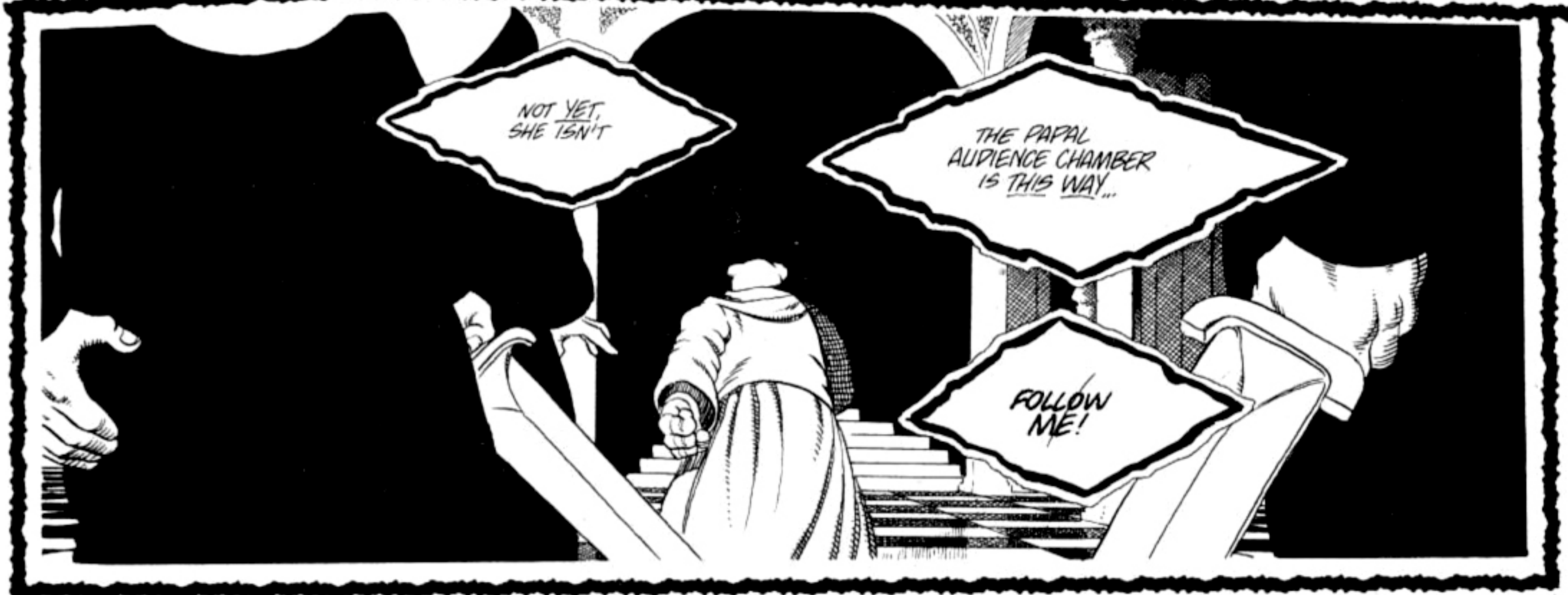
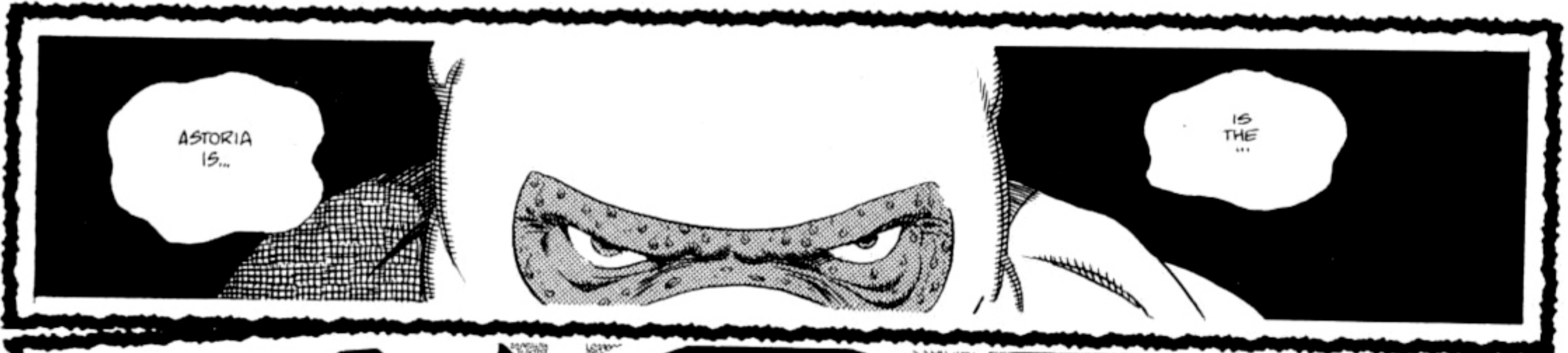
FLAWED.

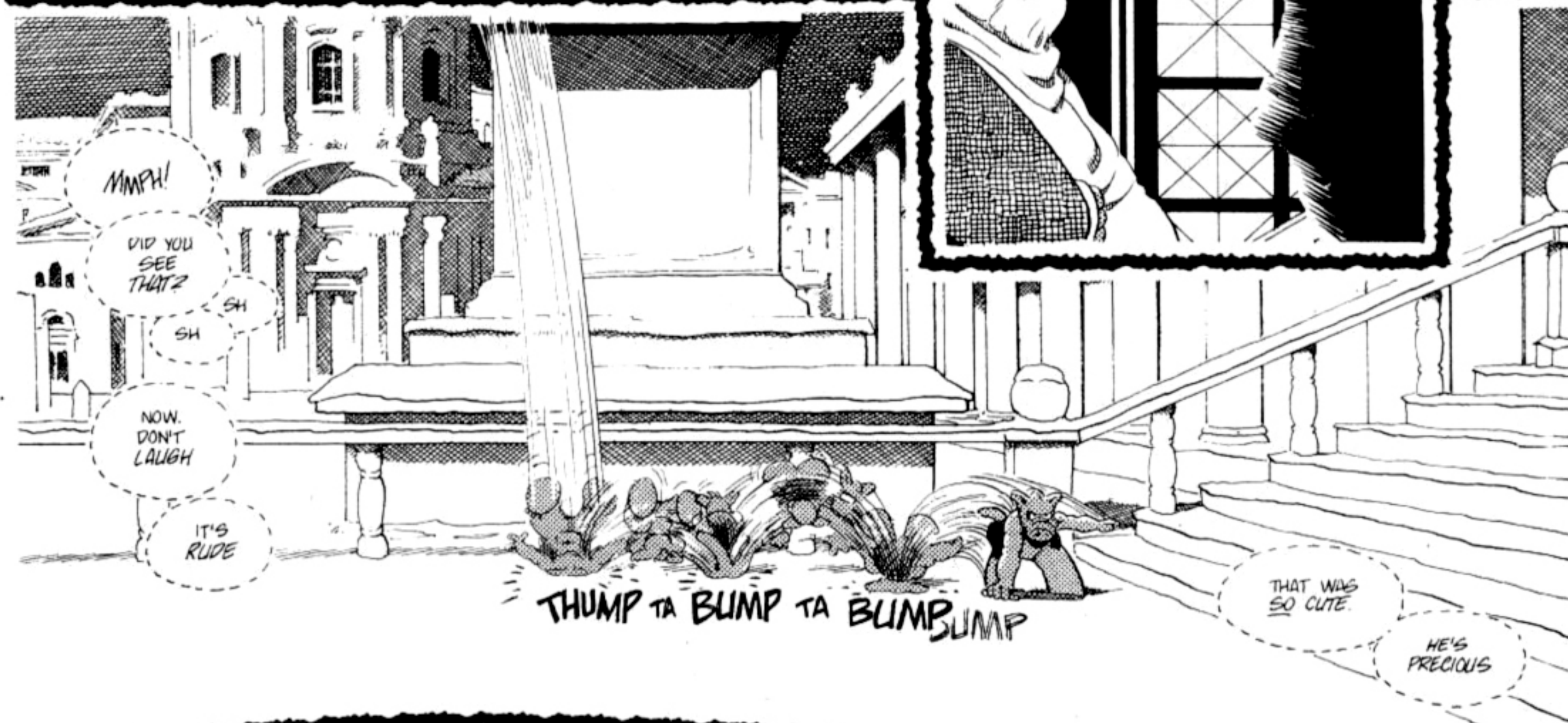
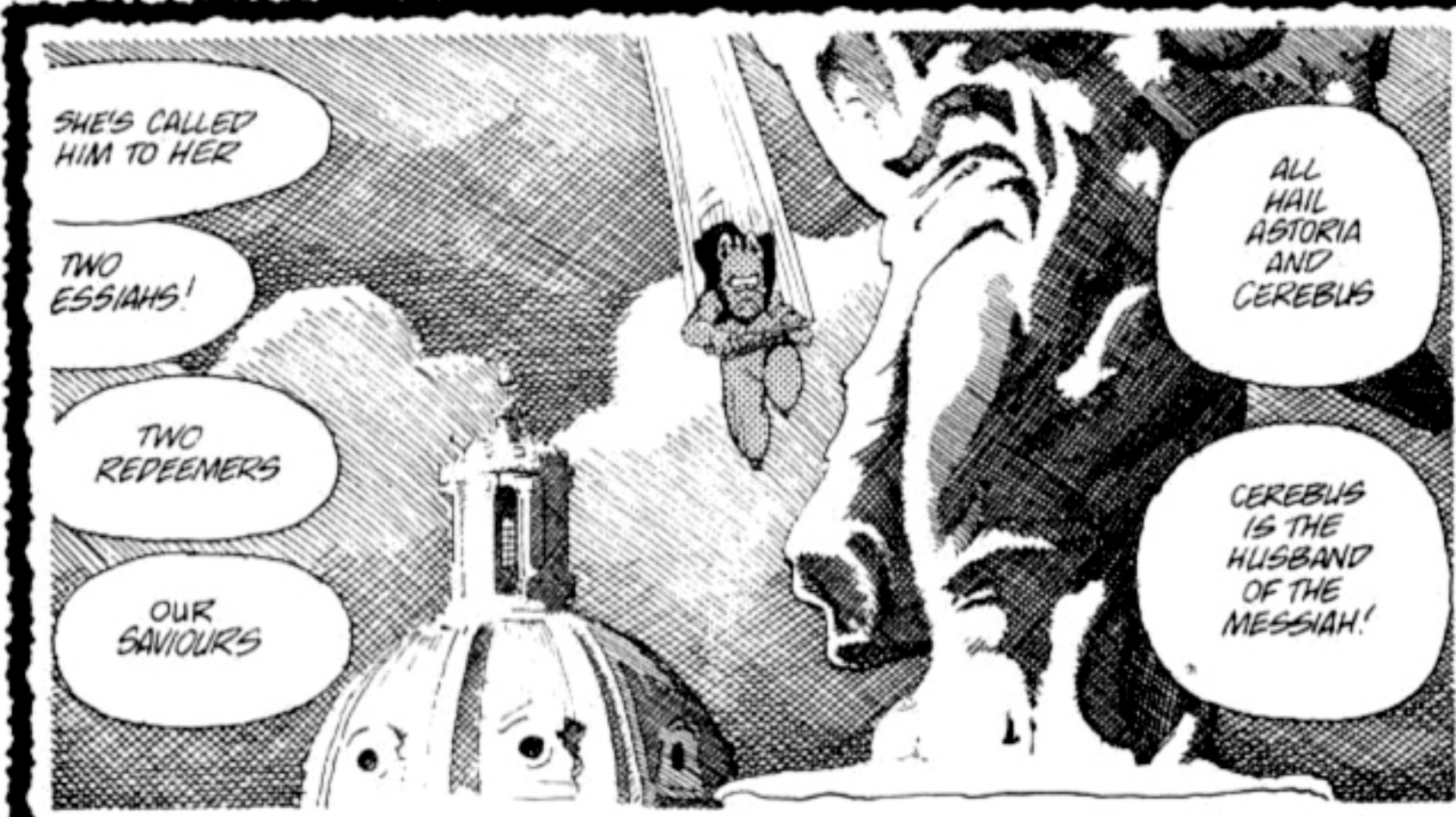
SO.

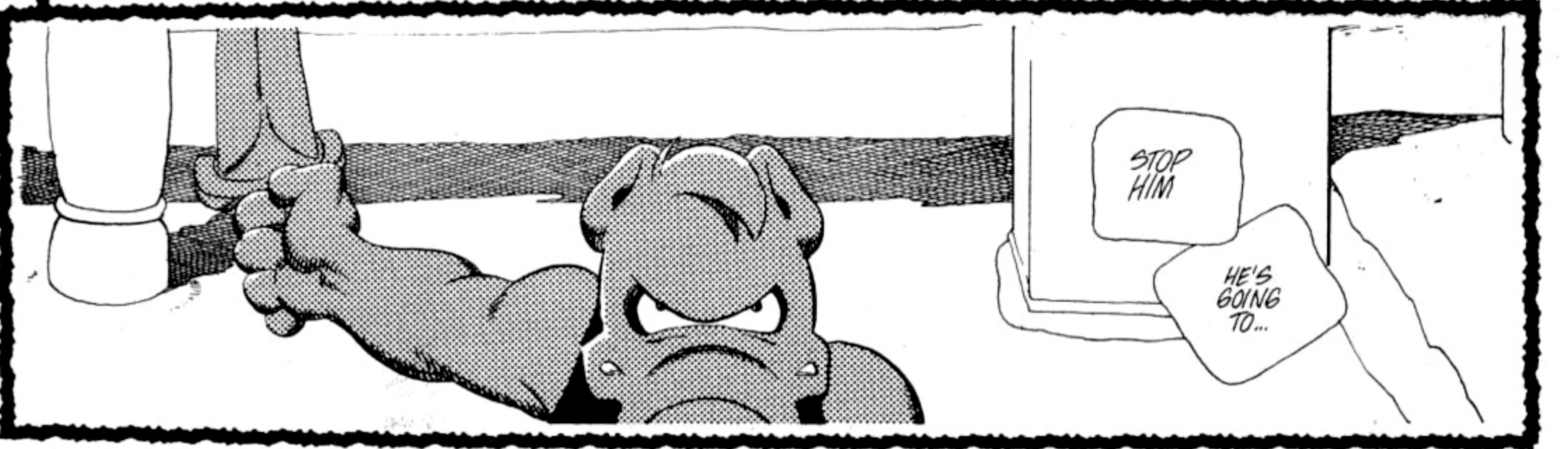
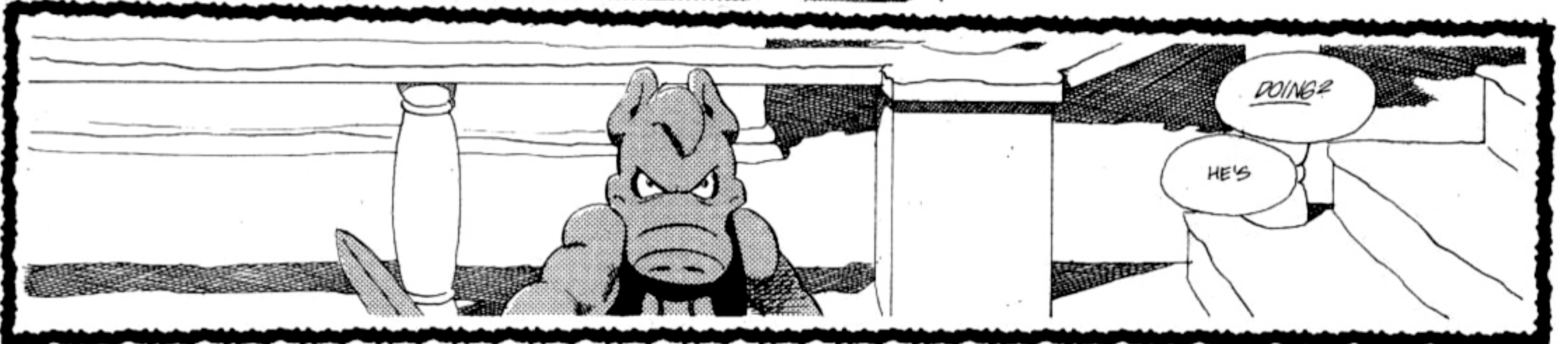
SO
THAT'S
IT...

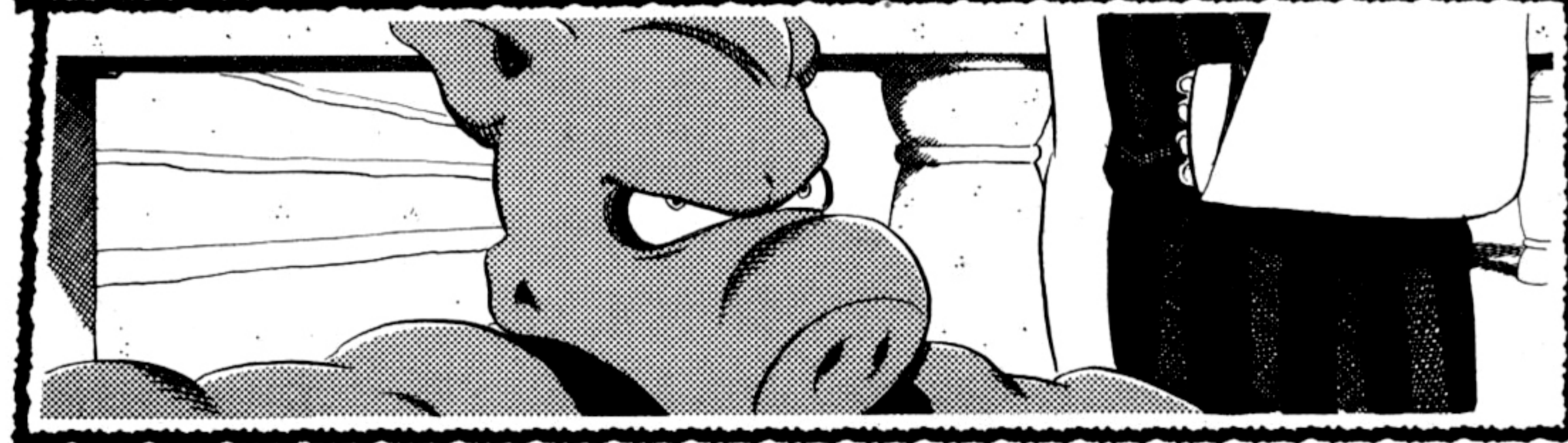
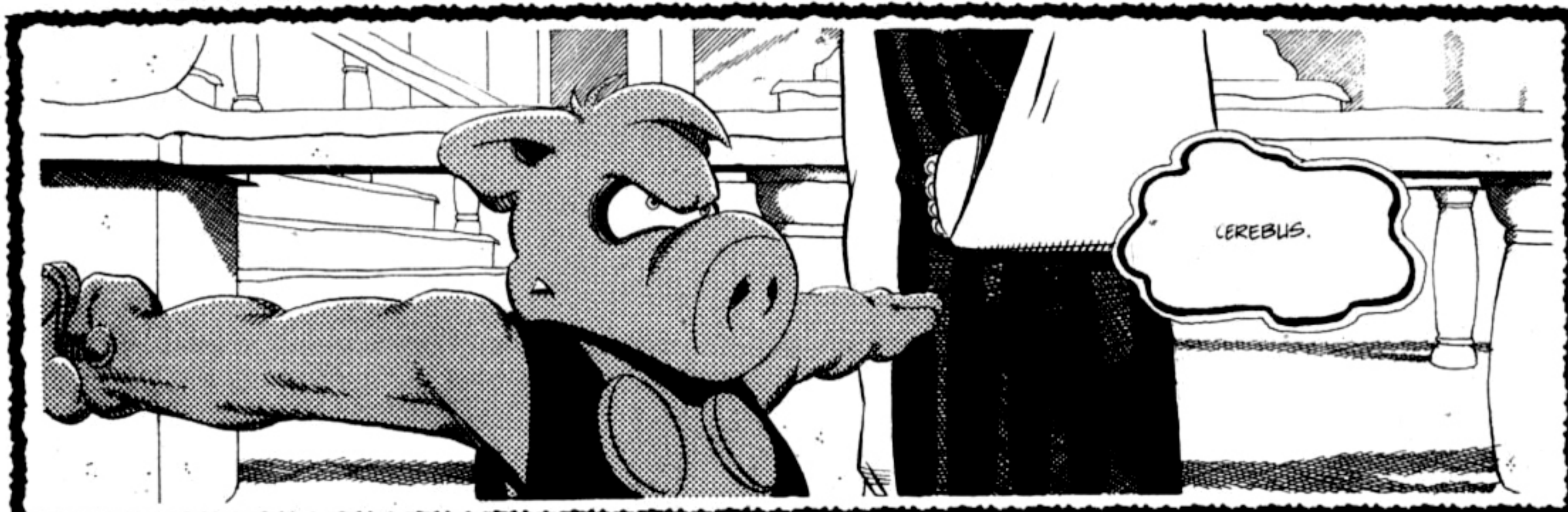
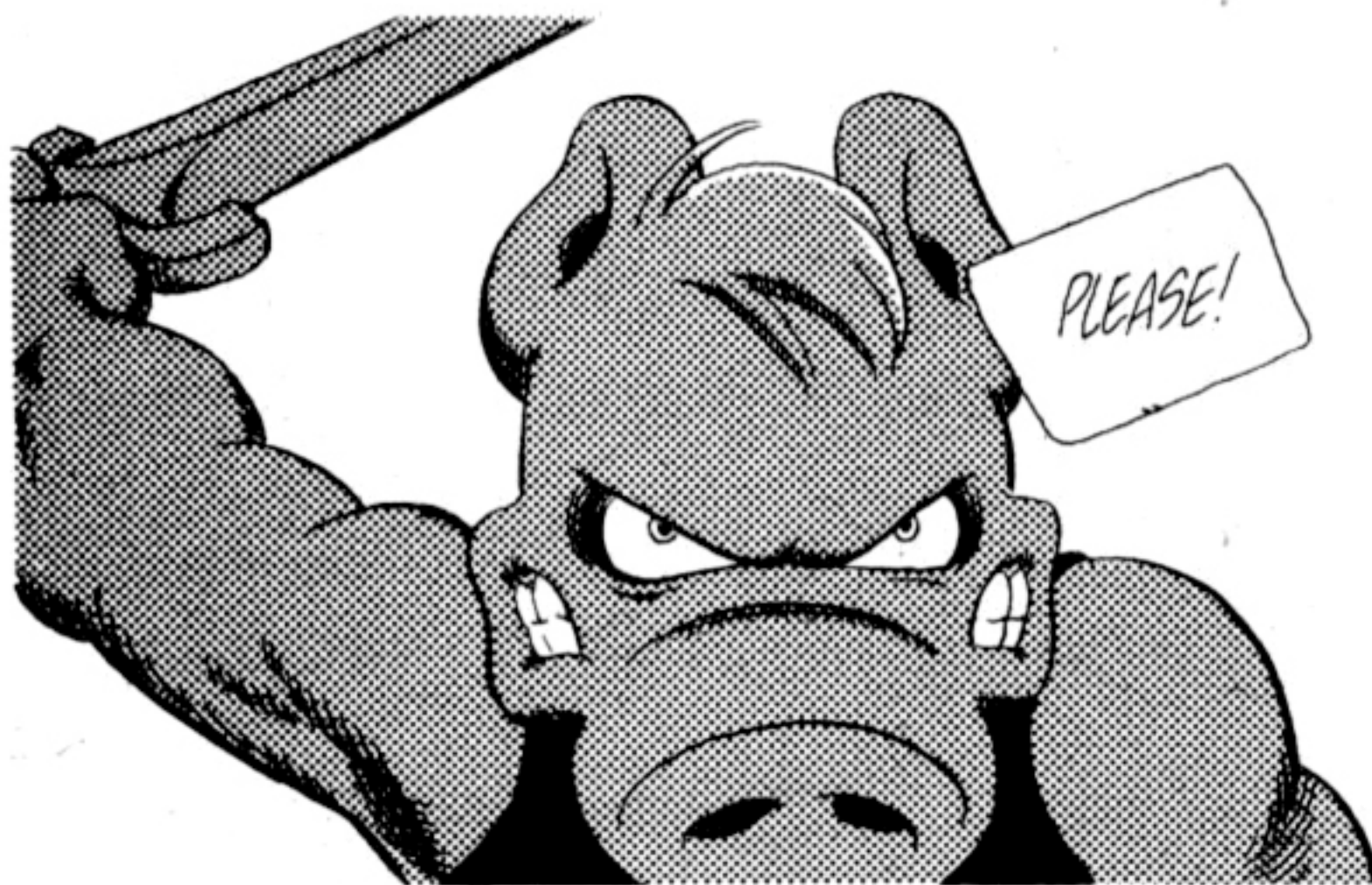
WE'RE
BEATEN.

ASTORIA...







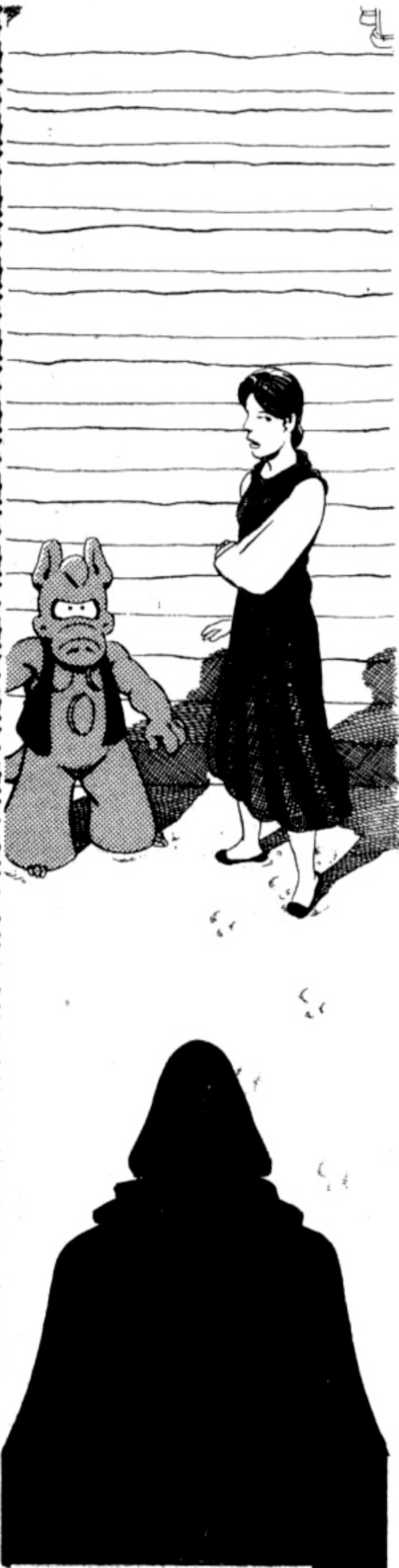




ASTORIA.



IT'S
TIME.



m-mercy...

I s-
surrender



PLEASE
FORGIVE MY
...
MELODRAMATIC
...
DISGUISE.

I'M AFRAID
IT WAS THE
ONLY WAY
FOR ME...

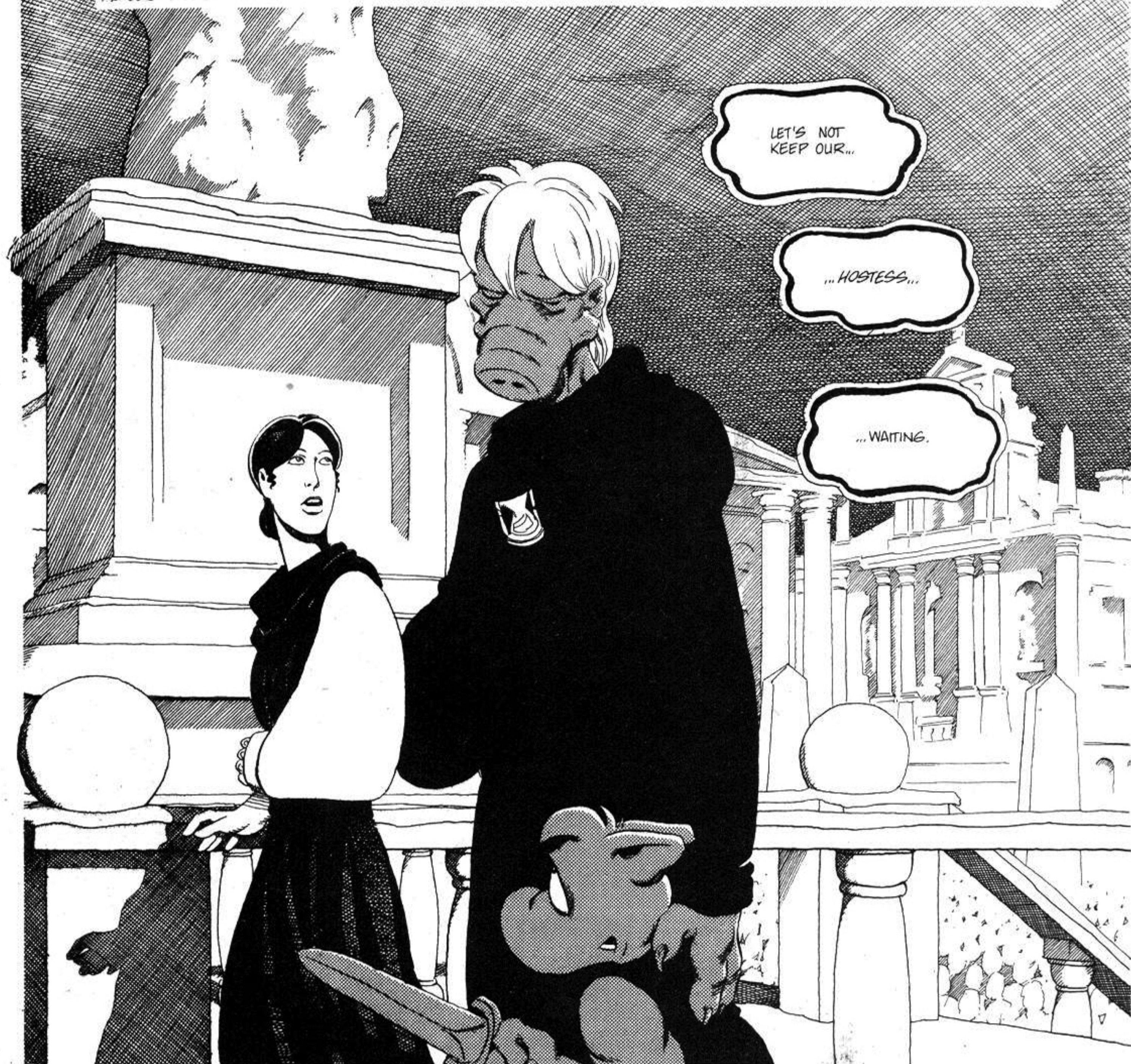
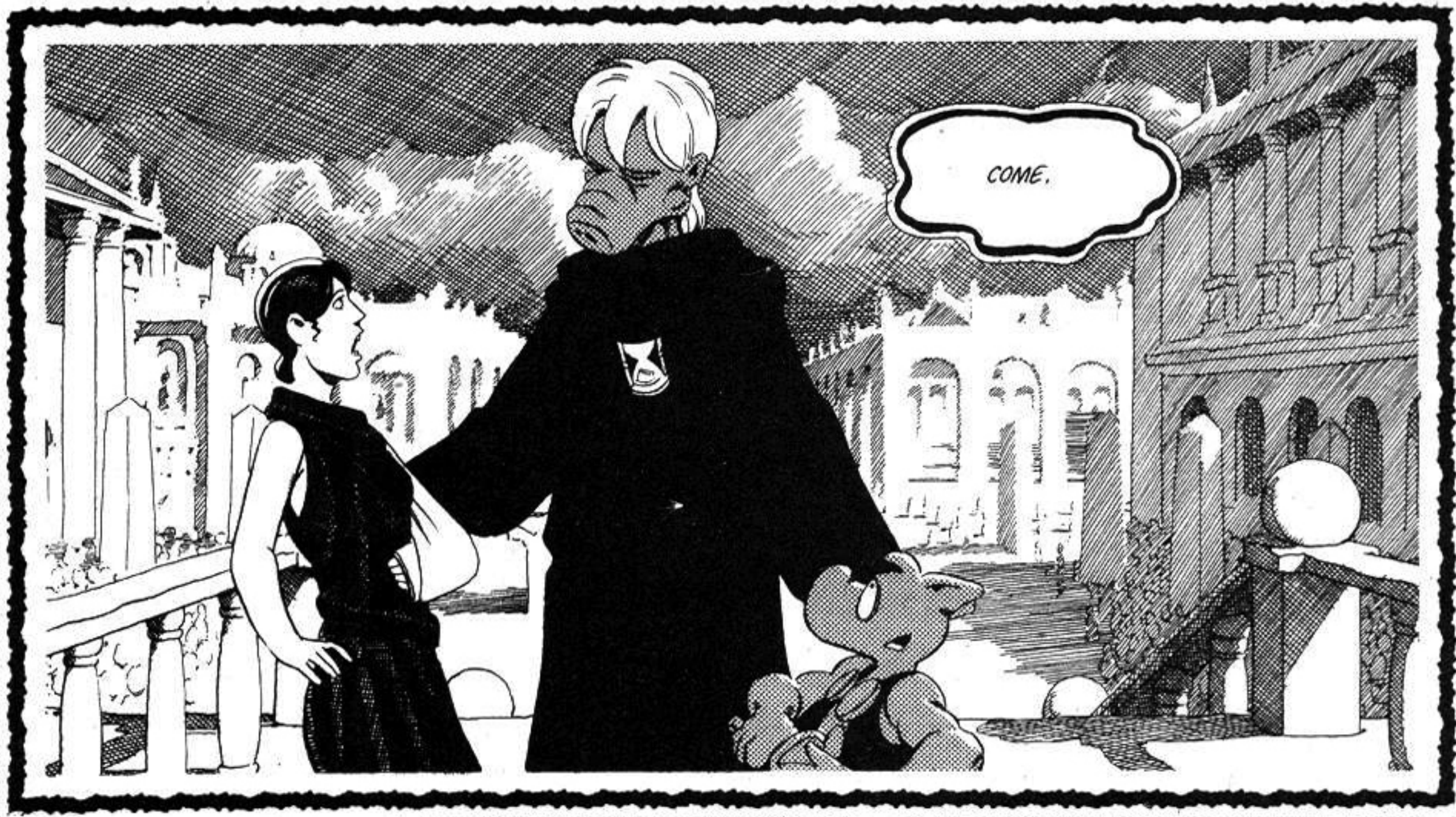


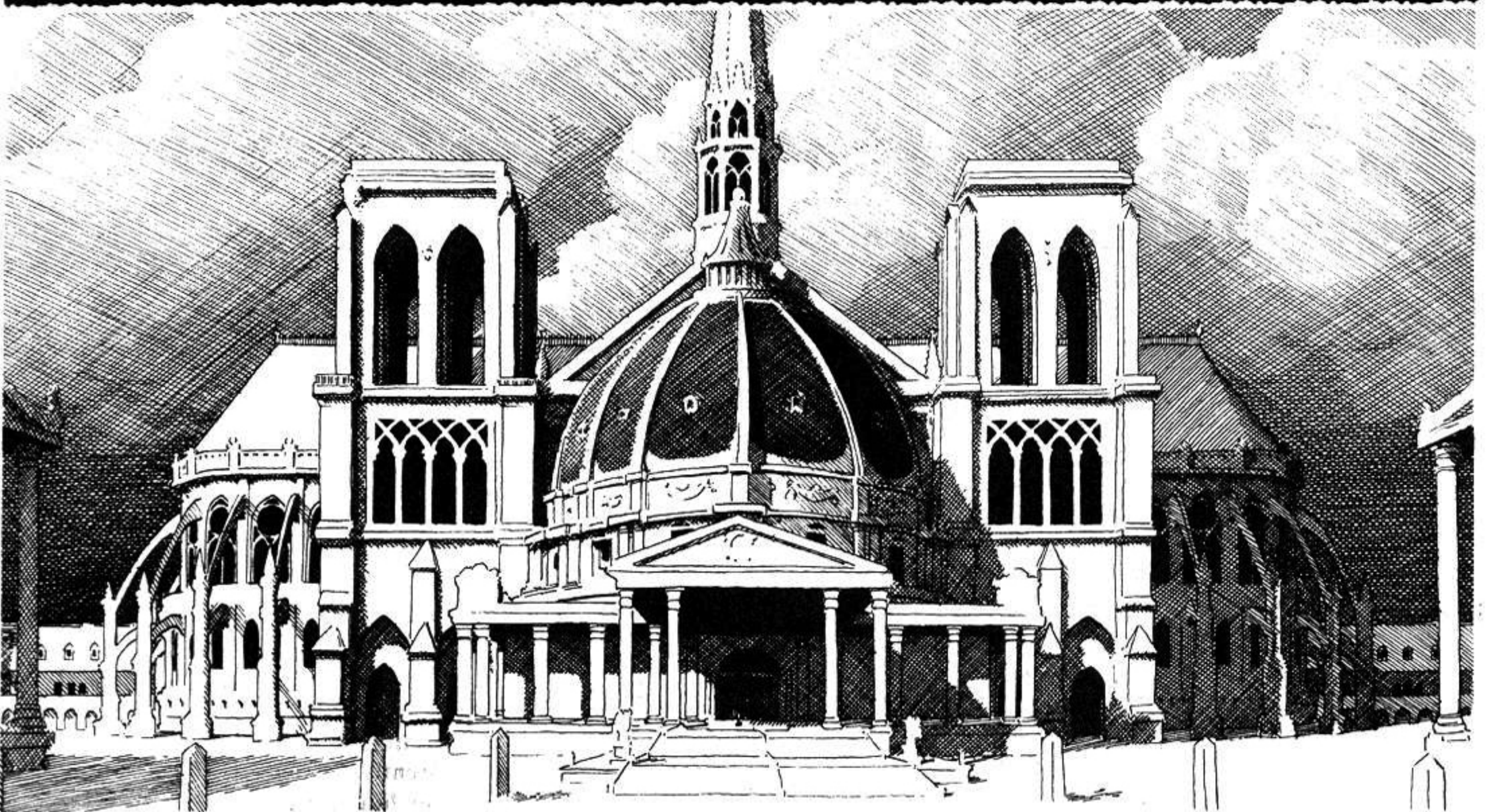
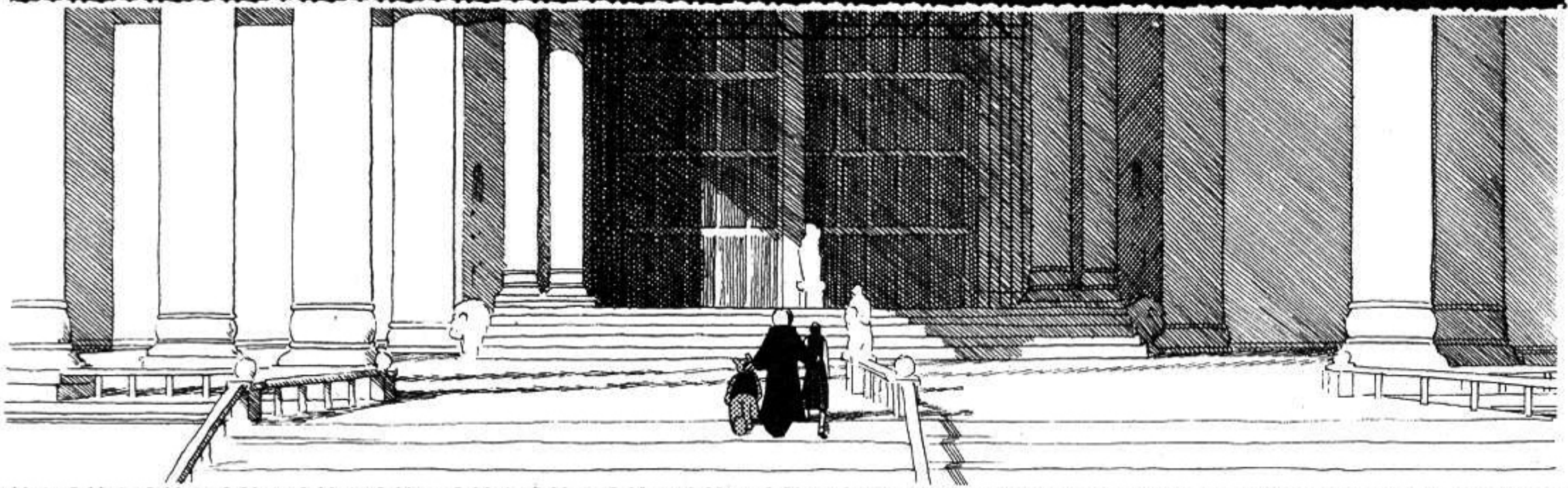
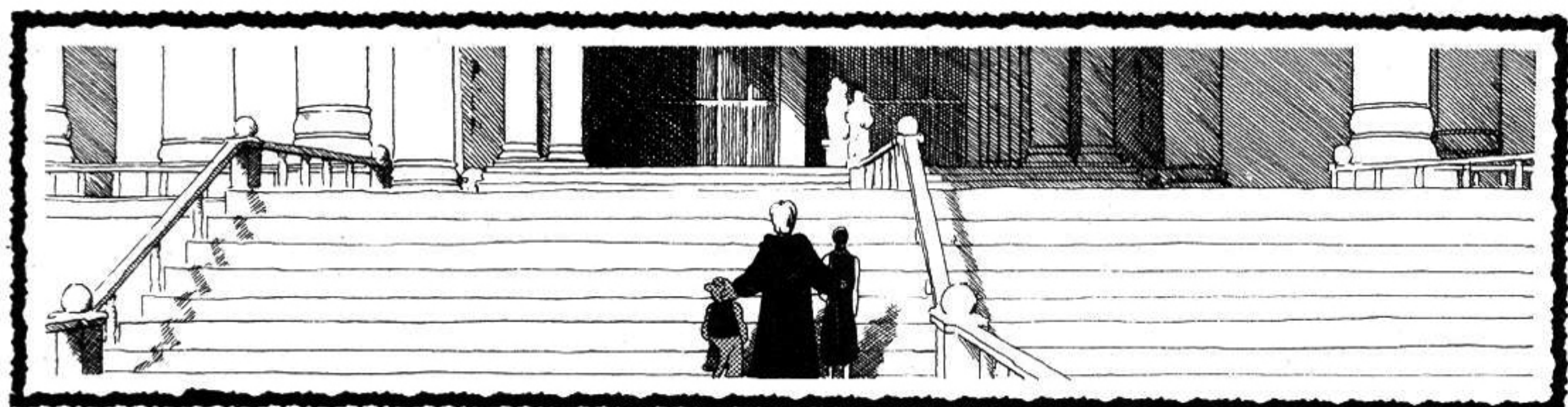
TO PASS
THROUGH
THE STREETS
...



UNMOLESTED.







book three **Leads**



Victor Reid had exactly five hundred and fifty-six crowns remaining of his original advance payment for Ascension. Forever Palnu languished in the bottom drawer of his desk (good riddance, he thought to himself), incomplete save for a sample chapter, a much-corrected and modified outline and a few disconnected fragments. Côte d'Azur (or, rather, a number of tantalizing passages and

hastily scrawled notes) lounged seductively in various places around his study. Ignoring the latter was very much like forgetting Beth, a futile (albeit necessary) exercise in self-deception.

How had he come to this point in his life, he wondered, tapping the blank sheet of his notepaper with the feathered end of his quill. What curious alignment of astrological bodies; what society-wide conspiracy had propelled him here into uncharted, undesired and undesirable waters?



For some years (sixteen, to be precise), Victor had been labouring in virtual obscurity on a series of historical fictions centered on the interwoven relationship of Cirinism and Kevillism in all geographic areas of Estarcion. Far from a new planetary configuration or universal conspiracy, it was the fact of Cirin's takeover of the city-state of Iest which had transformed his career (and, consequently, Victor himself). His modest and loyal following had begun to grow. As it did so, Victor had permitted himself to recognize only that he no longer had to worry about his ability to pay his monthly rent; that he was able to afford better quality notepaper and quills which lasted several pages instead of a few paragraphs.

As a result, That Black Day (as it was known to Victor in his innermost thoughts) had come as a complete surprise to him; That Black Day when he had entered his favourite reads store, *The Beguiled*, in search of a copy of his latest work, and had found it to be absent from its customary place: the rearmost section, lower left, second shelf from the bottom, under the designation 'Ephemera'. He had finally inquired if the store had failed to order it (an infrequent but not-altogether-unheard-of occurrence). The clerk had led him to an ornate, brightly-lit shelf near the front door, where he had proudly pointed to the work in question. 'Your new home,' he had declared, beaming. 'Popular Authors' read the sign, beaming. Popular authors. Victor had gone directly from *The Beguiled* to the nearest tavern and had proceeded to get very, very drunk, very, very quickly.

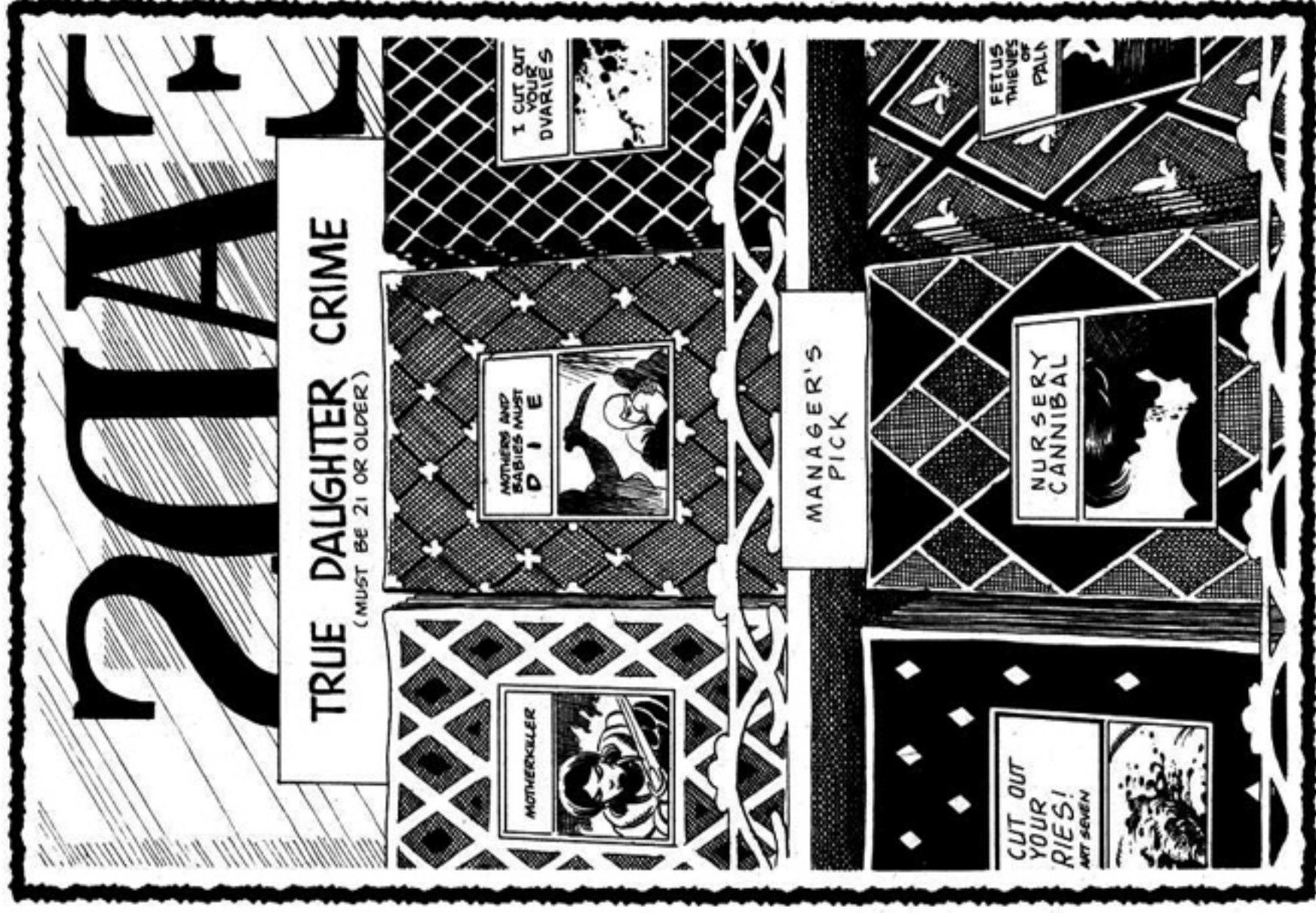
Over a period of several unproductive and liquor-sodden weeks he had made an uneasy peace with his new situation,

rationalising that the placement and status of his works fell outside of his jurisdiction and should, as a consequence, be outside of his concern. He began to joke at conferences and personal appearances that he viewed himself as the Least Popular of the Popular Authors. After a time, people stopped laughing at this *petit bon mot* and merely looked perplexed.

The effect of this on Victor was devastating and he had retreated into a sullen state of deliberate silence and gloom, wilfully ignoring his surroundings at promotional events and convocations. So morose and self-absorbed did he become that his mood infected the swelling ranks of his coterie of readers. They exchanged pleasantries with one another and bantered good-naturedly about Victor's symbolism and their favourites among his many characters; but as they approached the front of the autograph line, their conversation subsided into murmurs and whispers and, finally, into a grim silence which mirrored Victor's own. As a result, these processions came to resemble nothing so much as a line of mourners, paying their final respects to a recently departed friend of long-standing (it was not unusual for them to remark to one another on leaving his presence that Victor seemed 'very life like and natural').

When the requisite number of signatures had been duly rendered on copies of his work, small scraps of paper, as well as the occasional article of clothing and exposed limb, Victor further reinforced his status as the 'dearly departed' by doing exactly that: retreating, with unseemly haste, to his hotel room.

There, he would embrace the bottle of cognac which was mandated as part of his appearance fee. Having dispatched the better part its contents in short order, Victor would lie back on the bed, fully clothed, cross his hands over his chest and fall into a troubled, though dreamless, slumber. The absence of a priest, the discordant sound of his snoring and his inevitable awakening with a pounding headache and a desert-dry throat the only elements which were at variance with the perfect sanctity of the tableau which might have served as an altar piece in some mythical Church of Tarim (Literary Icon) over a small plaque bearing the title: His Final Rest.



The *Palnu* series had been, from the outset, an unsalvageable mess. Cirinism and Kevillism never having taken hold in that most independent and wide-open of frontier city-states, Victor had decided long ago that it merited a single read at best. He had envisioned that read as a straightforward morality tale concerning a fictitious member of the House of Tavers (Lady Howe, a widow with two children) and the effect upon her of Lord Julius' brief marriage to Astoria. He had crafted a simple cautionary tale around her as she wrestled with the Kevillist ideal of 'choice above all', documenting the gradual destruction this brings about in the life of a simple and good-hearted woman who, previously, had derived all of her joy and satisfaction from caring for her offspring. Cirin's occupational government had placed it very high on their list of 'recommended reads' shortly after the invasion. As this had taken place during one of Victor's week-long visits to the *Bull & Finch* he was ignorant of that fact, though the effect was proving inescapable.

Victor had always regarded illustrators as something between an unnecessary evil and a terminal malignancy in the world of reads publishing. There was a perverse streak within every one of them (Victor was certain of this) which compelled them to render everything within their engravings except that which was described in the author's text. First among equals in wilful desecration was M. Zulli, who lived in the next street over from Victor. When *Lady of Palnu* (upon which M. Zulli had been inflicted) was published, Victor had been horrified to discover that sweet, matronly, gray-haired Lady Howe, she of the rosy cheeks and even rosier disposition, had been rendered as a buxom harlot, with sultry gaze, painted lips and cascades of raven hair. It had been too much for Victor to bear, a final straw upon the haystack, and he had gone directly to the perpetrator's lair, there to demand satisfaction of the most extreme sort. Cowed and ashen in the face of Victor's fury, M. Zulli's housekeeper had, without demur, ushered the red-faced author directly to the work area on the second floor.

There, before Victor's eyes, motionless as a statue, wearing a form-fitting gown of black velvet, her hands pressed to her cheeks, her eyes and mouth frozen in astonishment, was the model who served as the basis for M. Zulli's Lady Howe. M. Zulli himself appeared completely unperturbed by the unannounced interruption.

'What can I do for you?' he asked, without looking up, hunched over his illustration table, his hand moving smoothly and meticulously in long parallel strokes.

Victor had introduced himself as the author of *Lady of Palnu*. He had then poured forth a litany of extravagant compliments on the subject of M. Zulli's artistic style, his attention to detail, his ability to capture and sustain a mood, the curiously affecting interplay of light and shadow that was a hallmark of his works.

'Mm,' Zulli had said. Like most members of his occupation, he was a man of few words, most of them unintelligible.

Politely, Victor had asked if he might be permitted to watch the master illustrator at work: he who had breathed such vivid life into Victor's humble tale.

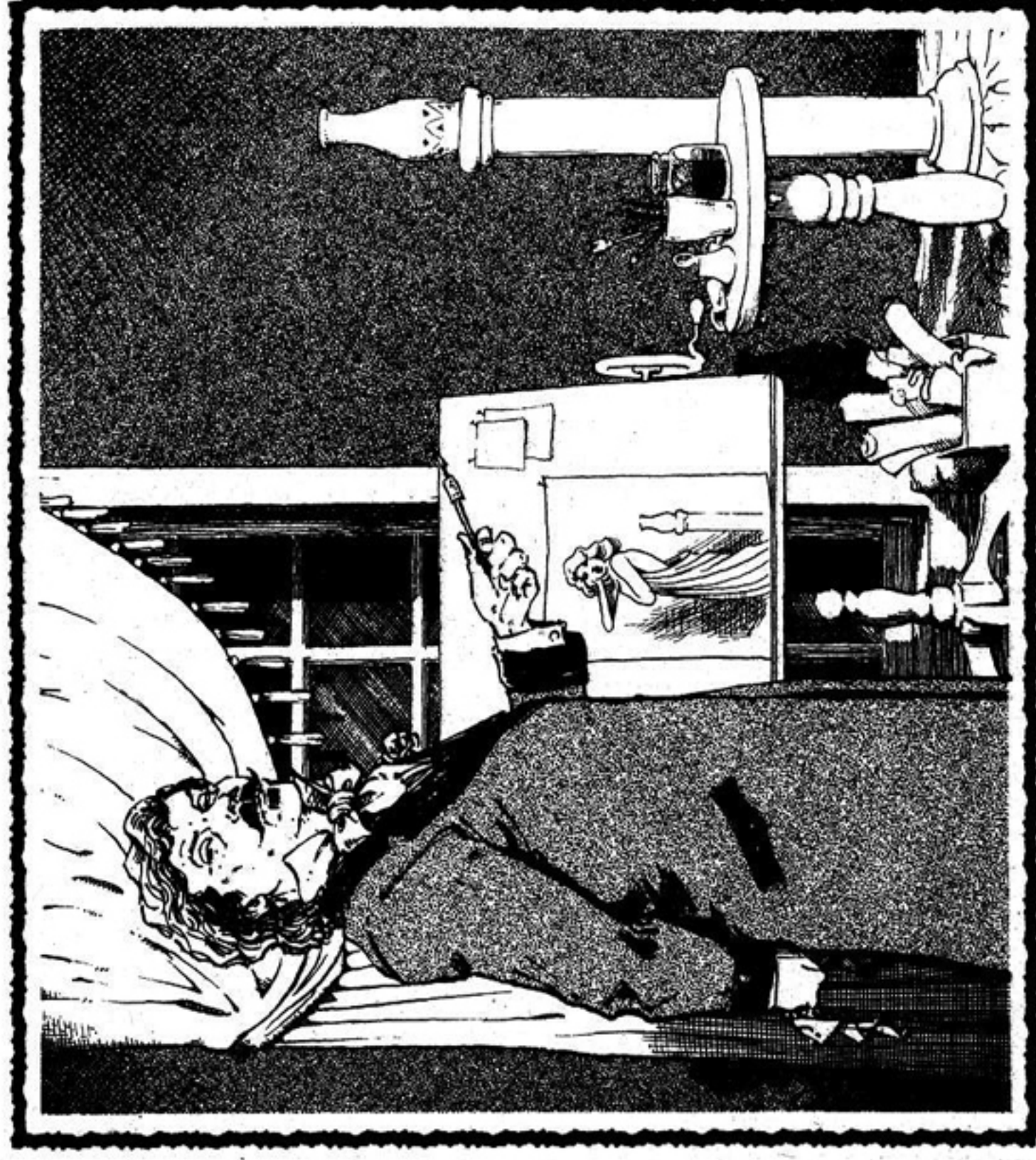
'I guess. Just don't touch anything,' he acquiesced before lapsing into silence.

For a short while, Victor had maintained the pretense of scrutinizing the stubby, begrimed fingers and the bent and battered rendering implement. He had soon realized that Zulli had no more awareness of Victor's presence in the room than he did of the fact that the socks he wore were of different colours (one was a crimson and navy plaid, the other a light beige). Victor had quietly eased himself onto a small wooden stool after covering it with his handkerchief and contented himself with staring, unashamedly, at the most beautiful woman he had ever seen. The studio had become a still-life: 'Illustrator, Author and *Modèle Surprise*'. Over the course of the next several hours, M. Zulli's right hand and forearm represented the only movement in the cavernous room.

Beth.

Her name was Beth. For several weeks, Victor was a regular visitor to the studio of M. Zulli, where he passed most of his afternoons. Zulli had paid him no more attention on his subsequent visits than he had on the first.

Victor had persuaded his publisher, House of Shadows, to draw up a contract for four more *Palnu* reads, each of which was to feature the soon-to-be redoubtable Lady Howe. They sold briskly, though confusion was widespread among his readership when Victor's sweet, matronly lead character became involved in a series of ever more wildly implausible adventures as a defender of good morals, who seemed always to be staggering through the seamier neighbourhoods of Palnu City in varying stages of *dishabille* at the conclusion of each chapter (and, as word of this new theme in Victor's work began to



spread, they sold very briskly indeed).

When M. Zulli would be called away to greet a visitor (most of whom, unlike Victor, were good enough to wait in the parlour) or when the illustrator would take one of his infrequent lunch breaks, Victor would engage Beth in conversation. Or, rather, he would *attempt* to engage Beth in conversation. Victor had discovered that models made illustrators seem eloquent by contrast. And so these conversations took the form of extended monologues on Victor's part on a wide variety of subjects, punctuated by a limited selection of grunts and shrugs on Beth's part (each, of course, ranging between the charming and the sublime) with one notable exception. The exception came on that fateful day when Victor, in his best and most chivalrous manner, had held forth on the subject of models and their financial compensation. He had pointed out that, without models, illustrations could not exist, and, further, without illustrations, reads could not exist. In short, he had concluded, it was impossible to overrate the importance of models to the literary world. Models, Authors and Illustrators were bound together; their shared fate was the cornerstone, nay, the very foundation of the burgeoning reads industry.

'Yeah?' Beth had said, gazing intently at Victor as if she were seeing him (really seeing him) for the first time.

He had fairly bounded home from that session, his feet scarcely touching the cobblestones, his heart brimming, spilling over with soon-to-be-required love.

And so it had been Another Black Day (it seemed to Victor that his existence consisted entirely of Black Days, strung like pearls on strands of ennui and uneventfulness) when he had arrived at M. Zulli's studio, only to discover a different model who vaguely resembled Beth, her clothes in disarray, her right hand demurely covering an exposed breast, frozen in mid-stagger.

'Uh. Where's Beth?' Victor had inquired.

'She wanted a share of my royalties,' said M. Zulli, turning away from his work and looking at Victor (really *looking* at him) for the first time. 'So I fired her.'

Pleading a crushing workload, Victor had taken his leave of M. Zulli's studio and home for the last time.

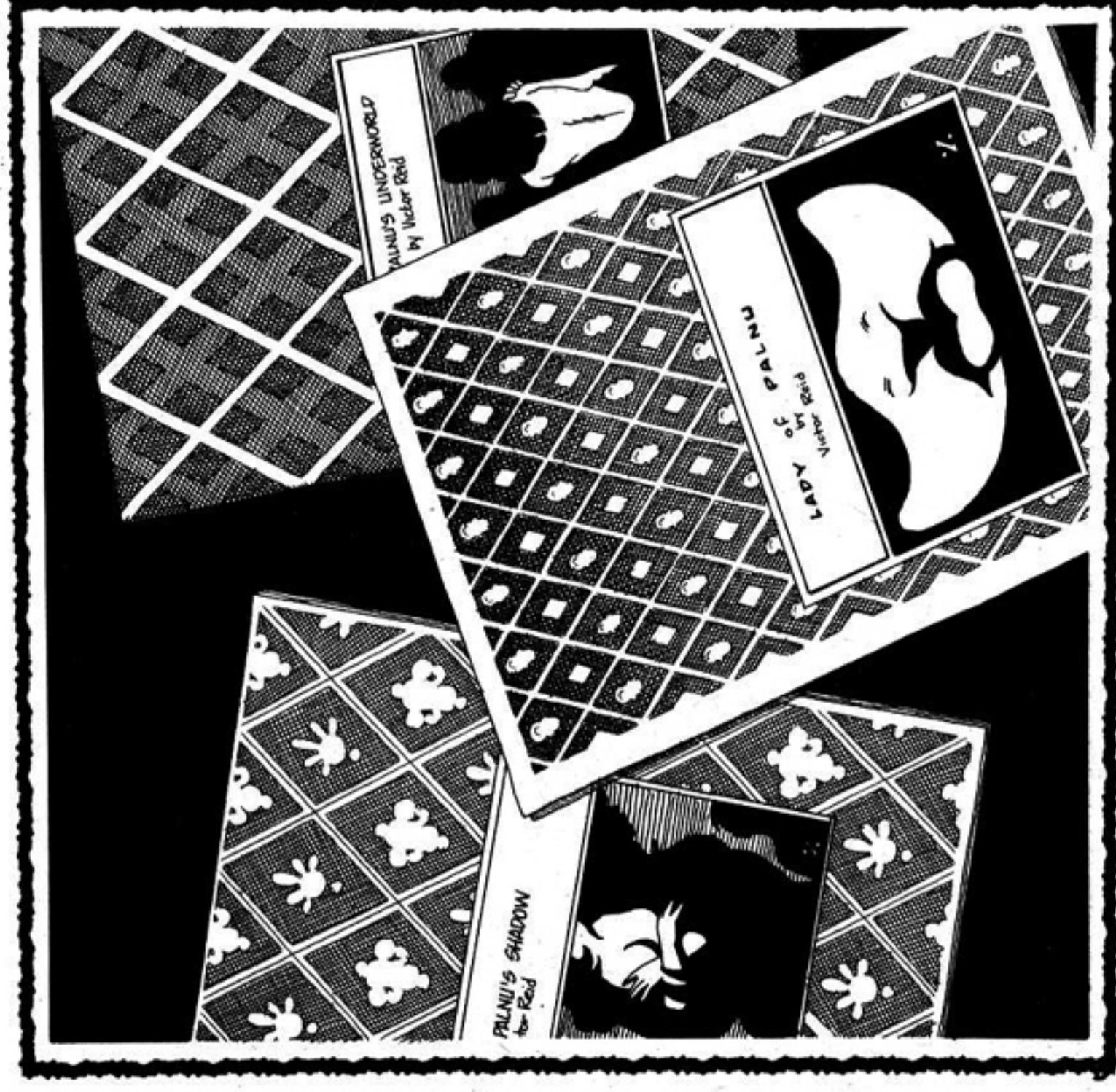
He had set up an appointment with his publisher at House of Shadows and had explained that, virtually overnight, he had developed an insoluble writer's block which made the completion of *Forever Palnu* an impossibility. Since *In Palnu's Shadow* was

now entering its third printing in as many weeks, Victor's publisher took a rather dim view of his favourite author (a status Victor had achieved without his knowledge somewhere between the first printing's release date and the receipt of reorders for the second) adopting such a defeatist attitude. In fact, he viewed Victor's defeatism in the same light with which he regarded his printing presses when they insisted on discharging buckled and torn reams of expensive paper instead of clean, saleable and perfectly replicated copies: as a personal affront, maliciously intended.

It was quite impossible to release Victor from his contract, he said. They had already advertised *Forever Palnu* and *Crimes of Palnu* (this, of course, wasn't true; advertisements for House of Shadows reads were never placed until at least two months after publication. Victor's publisher saw no reason to waste good money on advertising until he could be certain that a read was successful enough to warrant it). Victor was adamant. There would be no *Forever Palnu* and there would be no *Crimes of Palnu*. He said he was prepared to return the total advance of twenty crowns which had been rendered on both titles; he would write a check that very moment (this, of course, wasn't true. Leaving aside the fact that Victor had left his chequebook at home, he had exactly eight crowns and seven copper bits left to his name, assuming his grocer hadn't yet attempted to cash the cheque he had written that morning). Victor's publisher asked what compensation Victor intended for all of the advertising and promotion money he had invested, all of the money he had already spent on designs and special in-store displays (in point of fact that amount was exactly eight crowns and seven copper bits less than Victor had in his account, pending resolution of the grocer question). What do you suggest, Victor asked, fuming inwardly. I don't like being unreasonable, said Victor's publisher (this, of course, wasn't true. He liked very much to be unreasonable so long as being unreasonable produced lucrative results). Suppose you sign an agreement assigning House of Shadows all rights and title to *Lady of Palnu*, *In Palnu's Shadow* and *Palnu's Underworld* and we'll just close the book on *Forever Palnu* and *Crimes of Palnu*.

Fine, Victor had said; he just wanted to be rid of all reminders of Beth, M. Zulli and the whole sordid mess. Victor's publisher stood up from behind his desk and walked to his office door.

I'll have the agreement drawn up and ready for you to sign tomorrow morning, he said.



Fine, Victor had said, sufficiently irritated that he wasn't about to expend any of his creative energies in coming up with a synonymous rejoinder. And with that, he had left House of Shadows for the last time.

Victor's now-former publisher summoned one of his messengers and told him to make a reservation for a private room for two at the Café Royale; he wanted it lavish, but intimate. Victor's now-former publisher suddenly felt like celebrating.

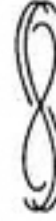
He then summoned a second messenger and told him to relay a message to his wife, informing her that he would be working quite late and had no idea when he might be home.



And so it was that Victor had discharged his contractual obligations to the well-regarded but economically unsound (in the world of reads publishing the two were virtually synonymous) House of Shadows.

Ignorant of the extent and scope of his new popularity (though, by the same token, now something of a connoisseur of various cognacs and their respective abilities to induce and enhance slumber), he now prepared himself for a shopping expedition. Metaphorically speaking, he intended to take the wicker basket of his literary future to the entrepreneurial fresh produce stalls of the free marketplace. And there, having thumped the skins of viability, having poked the firmness of verisimilitude and having examined all contractual undersides for the tell tale bruising of malfeasance, Victor would then endeavour to make his selection. And having, by this means, formed a more perfect union of market-share musculature and the untapped potential of his literary prowess (or a close approximation thereof), Victor was certain that he could then return to the careful honing of his chosen craft without further impediment or distraction.

In short, Victor was going to a Reads Trade Show to find a new publisher.



Trade shows were a new variable in the ever-more-complicated world of reads publishing, distinct from the smaller, reader-oriented conferences in that attendance was limited to publishers, distributors and proprietors of reads stores. Though not officially sanctioned, authors and illustrators had recently been granted limited access to the social events, so long as they behaved and cleaned up after themselves.

Victor had been at a literary dinner some months before where Henry Wotton had

held forth, at some length, on the subject of trade shows (there was a general consensus, at the time, that Wotton was the only author of sufficiently perverse sensibility to actually attend such an event).

Wotton had begun with a few innocuous observations on the various definitions of the word 'trade'. It could encompass a simple exchange of one commodity for another, between individuals. It defined an occupation which was not well-regarded enough to be called a profession. In the world of business, it was used to describe an individual company's total transactions involving commodities, services and currency. In the many civilised countries and city-states of Estarcion, 'trade' was the term used to describe the internal exchanges of goods and services and currency among its populace, as well as larger exchanges with other peoples and other governments.

Of course, he added, 'trade' was also a term used in the field of prostitution.

It was an article of faith with Victor and others that Henry Wotton, at a specific point in any given conversation, would cross the clearly defined border between the appropriate and the inappropriate. Several of the ladies at the table emitted small, mewling noises comparable to those uttered by kittens in protest of rough treatment. Several of the gentlemen scowled disapprovingly in Wotton's direction. These reactions would have been sufficient to drive anyone of good sense, hastily, from table to domicile, there to compose notes of abject apology in the vain hope of salvaging what remained of their societal status. As Henry Wotton had no societal status to speak of, these reactions were completely without effect.

'Rough trade', he continued (at this, Victor could hear a low rumbling sound rising in the throat of the gentleman to his left), was a term used to describe males and females in the aforementioned field whose aspect was of the lowest and meanest sort, violent, bestial creatures who brought those qualities to bear on the world's oldest profession.

Anyway, Wotton had said (recognizing that he had stretched the boundaries of propriety at the staid old Café Royale to a new frontier, hitherto undreamt), I attended one of these... trade shows recently. Here he had added such a salacious emphasis to the word 'trade' that the new and unpredictable connection (a conversational trick for which he was notorious) was made, instantly, in everyone's mind. His monologue picked up momentum as he described a well-known reads publisher



who had approached him at the 'get-acquainted' reception. He added the same emphasis to 'get-acquainted' that he had used to underscore 'trade' and several of his listeners (Victor included) had begun to smile, in spite of themselves.

The fellow expressed interest in my future plans,' said Wotton, warming to his subject, 'and enquired as to their nature. I told him that while I had no *specific* future plans, I had every intention of continuing in my present occupation. I then asked if I was given to understand that he himself had certain . . . interests in that area as well. He could scarcely conceal his eagerness. Oh, yes, he said, *many* interests . . . many . . . *varied* interests. I thought the adjective a trifle impertinent, but I replied with a practised equanimity. Variety, I said, is the spice of life, or so I am told. At this, I lowered my lashes and peered at him with a demure, but significant, sidelong glance. I think, he said, his voice deepening with drama, that, perhaps, our interests might be . . . mutual, then. All things are possible, one supposes, I replied diffidently, hoping to cool his ardour, which had become too demonstratively apparent and was, as a result, attracting the unwelcome attention of bystanders. I think I am safe in saying, were our interests to lie in the same direction then an . . . arrangement might be mutually beneficial, he persisted, a slight tremor evident in his voice and a fine mist of perspiration forming on his upper lip. I had discreetly removed a small fan from my vest pocket as he spoke and, snapping it open with a flourish, and using it to cover the lower half of my face, I replied, indeed? You *must* tell me more. Before he could clarify his assertions, we were joined by another publisher of my acquaintance whom I greeted warmly. The first fellow bristled visibly at this unwelcome intrusion. So, the two of you have had . . . past dealings, then, he said, his voice dripping venom. Oh, yes, I said, casually dripping my shoulder and in the process exposing a small expanse of shirt between my lapel and my tie. Many dealings. Many . . . satisfactory dealings. Many, the newcomer had agreed, beaming contentedly. We were just discussing my . . . future plans, I informed him, lightly fanning myself. How fortuitous, the new arrival had murmured, the very thing that was uppermost in my mind in coming here.'

Much of the rich detail of the rest of Wotton's story had been lost to Victor in the general hilarity which greeted each new embellishment and improvisation.

He did remember that by the story's conclusion, Wotton had lowered his jacket

on both sides to mid-bicep and that the three of them had departed the reception, Wotton with a publisher on each arm. They had adjourned to the author's rooms for a 'friendly drink' before 'consummating' the lucrative details of their respective publishing agreements.



Victor had arrived at the Regency for the fourth annual Davis, Diamond & Madison Seminar, Roundtable and Sales Conference (fortunately a hotel employee had found this lengthy appellation as confusing as Victor had and had mercifully added 'Reads Trade Show' in parentheses to the listing on the hotel directory) shortly after sunset.

At the registration desk, he had been provided with a shopping bag that was the size of a small suitcase, which contained his *Guide to Seminar, Roundtable and Conference Events, Rules of Conduct*, a current catalogue of Davis, Diamond & Madison 'product' (which was as thick as *Victor Reid's Complete Works* would have been, had such a volume existed), as well as a full transcript of the previous year's Roundtable (under the prodigious and unwieldy title of *Saturation: Being an Examination of Economic Forces at Work in the Reads Marketplace*, with subheadings 'Hot versus Coolest: When Titans Clash', 'Extracting That Last Copper Bit: Crowbar versus Tongs' and 'Unnumbered T'Capmin Bank Accounts: Towards a Secure Future').

In addition, Victor had been given a name badge which read 'Hello my name is Victoria Reis'. Attached to it was a small blue ribbon inscribed with the word 'Vendor'. Grimacing slightly, Victor was in the process of affixing it to his lapel and preparing to launch the next phase of his literary career as 'Victoria Reis, Vendor-at-Large', when he nearly collided with an extremely tall individual who had appeared as if from thin air.

'I'm very excited,' the tall individual had said.

Victor had laughed out loud, Henry Wotton's reminiscence being very much on his mind.

'Are you?' he asked.

'Oh, yes,' the tall individual had replied, diplomatically ignoring Victor's unseemly outburst. *Very* excited. I'm Denis Eastman, publisher of Kevin's Kitchen Enterprises. I've been following your work for years. All of us have at Kevin's Kitchen. We're *all* very, very excited.'

The mental image conjured by this assertion was almost too much for poor Victor and it was only through the greatest



self-possession that he was able to stifle a maniacal fit, of giggling. Once he had contained himself, but before he could venture a reply, one of the marble pillars had detached itself from a nearby wall and edged closer to him. Attached to the pillar, at Victor's eye level, was a name tag which read 'Mike Prosserman, Publisher, Vertigo Horse'. Suddenly, Victor realized that it wasn't a marble pillar at all, but one of the tallest human beings he had ever seen in his life, whose cream-coloured suit, fair complexion and light blond hair had merged with the beige column against which he had been leaning so thoroughly as to cause him to vanish from sight like a chameleon on a damp log.

'I think I can give you the big push you need,' the pillar had informed him.

'Excuse me?' Victor had said, now thoroughly lost in the land of Wotton imagery and seized by a claustrophobic panic as the crowd pressed the two giants closer to him, effectively blocking his view of the room (as well as most of the light from the large chandelier overhead).

'Vertigo Horse specializes in three things' (these he proceeded to tick off on fingers which, at close proximity, appeared to be the length of Victor's forearm). 'One, the big push; two, proper handling; three, hands-on participation. I think you'll find us the best choice for handling you properly,' he said by way of conclusion, handing Victor his card.

Victor felt a definite kinship with the embossed silhouette of a horse's head and the series of concentric rings vanishing into its furrowed brow. He wrestled with a reply, but all of Wotton's rejoinders seemed both inadequate and inappropriate to the situation. He could almost feel a price tag hanging from his forehead with 'Reduced to Clear' marked upon it in bold letters.

'Are you staying in the hotel?' the pillar asked.

'Er — yes, I am,' Victor had stammered.

'Why don't I come up to your room with my staff? I'm sure they'll want to be in on this.'

'I'm . . . that is . . . I haven't checked in yet. Some . . . uh . . . mix-up at the desk.'

'I'm in rooms four-fifty, four-fifty-two. Come up tonight for a drink after the exhibit room closes. We'll do business.'

And, with that, the pillar was gone. Shaken, Victor had forgotten entirely about Denis Eastman, who startled him by whispering in his ear:

'I'm not as big as Vertigo Horse, but I'm sure I can get the job done for you. Think

about it.'

And, with that, Denis Eastman was gone as well.

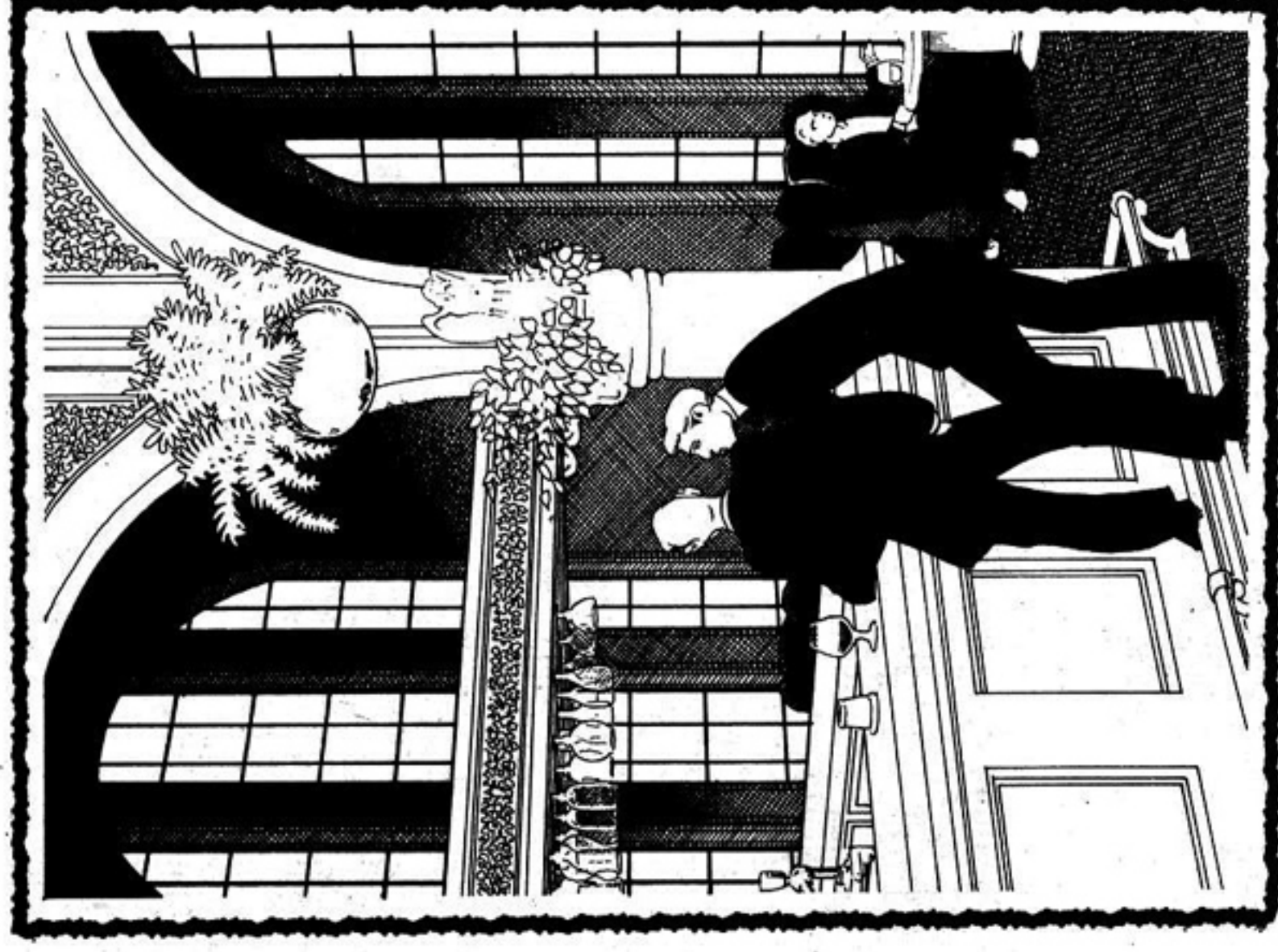
Somewhere, Victor thought, somewhere in this hotel there is a bottle of cognac with my name on it.

And, with that, Victor was gone as well.



The hotel bar made the lobby seem underpopulated by contrast. It had taken Victor the better part of an hour to edge his way a few yards towards the far wall where a pyramid of bottles and suspended glasses, visible over a sea of heads, marked the location of the oasis he sought. The closer he got, the slower his progress and the more the commonest of courtesies (his own included) became an endangered species. At last, his intolerance of large crowds and his reluctance to use the force necessary to advance his position overcame his thirst and he turned to leave. At that point, he discovered that departure was only marginally easier than advancement and he was forced to move sideways along lines of least resistance as he sought an opening in the wall of human flesh.

For a period of some minutes Victor found himself pressed against an individual bearing a publisher's badge (again, taller than any human being of Victor's acquaintance; he began mentally composing an outline for a fantasy read: *Land of the Giant Publishers*) with the single word 'Deviant' scrawled across it in shaky crimson letters. At first Victor had thought the fellow was endeavouring to address him, but soon realized that his cold and penetrating gaze was focussed firmly in the middle distance. He was rolling two metal balls in his left hand and waxing eloquent on the subject of strawberries. Specifically, his strawberries. From what Victor could gather, someone or other had taken the fellow's strawberries without his knowledge or consent, but that he had a good idea as to the perpetrator's identity and whereabouts. His strawberries were much admired, it seemed, and consequently represented a great temptation both to the perpetrator and other unsavory characters of his acquaintance. As an aside, a kind of historical footnote, the fellow mentioned that he himself had been instrumental, a pioneer of sorts, in the introduction of strawberries into Estarcion and a key figure in their renewed popularity at a time when there had been a real danger that strawberries, as we knew them, might have ceased to exist altogether had it not been for his intercession. He had even given some strawberries, at a point in the now



distant past, to an individual whose identity he was not at liberty to divulge (whom he proceeded to describe in such specific terms that there could be no doubt as to his identity: best-selling author and illustrator Ronin Sin). While he in no way regretted the gift of these strawberries, nor did he begrudge the unnamed individual his own substantial strawberry holdings which had been acquired through the intervening years, it troubled him, troubled him deeply that . . .

It was at this juncture that Victor found himself swept to one side by a flying wedge composed of trade show attendees who had elected to attempt a final 'death or glory' assault in the direction of the pyramid of bottles looming on the horizon. When he recovered his balance, Victor found himself face-to-face with another publisher (this one of uncharacteristically traditional proportions), Kim Grinch of Hey, Buddy Enterprises. Without preamble or salutation, he asked if Victor had had any dealings with (and here he named an editor who had recently left his employ). Victor acknowledged that he had recently had lunch with the woman in question and several mutual friends and acquaintances. A look of keen and malevolent interest had taken hold of Grinch's boyish features and he had launched into a series of stinging indictments (this was no mere exaggeration, for each of his assertions had been prefaced with 'The Accused did, on the date in question . . .'; 'The Accused did wilfully cause to . . .'; 'The Accused did with malice aforethought . . . and so on).

It was opportune that at that very moment several attendees had discovered one of their number attempting to conceal a half-filled tankard of ale and a wrestling match had ensued for possession of it which had opened up a small stretch of carpeted floor adjacent to Victor's position. Stepping nimbly into this unexpected opening, Victor might have made real progress to the exit had not his path been blocked by yet another publisher (though only slightly taller than Victor he appeared to weigh as much as Eastman and Prosserman combined) waving a packet of cigarettes.

'No, thank you,' Victor said, 'I don't smoke.'
'No, no,' the fellow protested. 'The card. The . . . card.'

He indicated one of those small cardboard representations of a figure from the world of competitive sport which were offered as premiums on certain brands of tobacco products.

'Your next . . . read,' he gasped (though his lungs doubtless consumed a disproportionately large volume of the available air, that was still a commodity for which, at the moment, demand outstripped supply by a wide margin), 'on the . . . backs . . . eighty . . . cards . . . limited . . . autographed.'

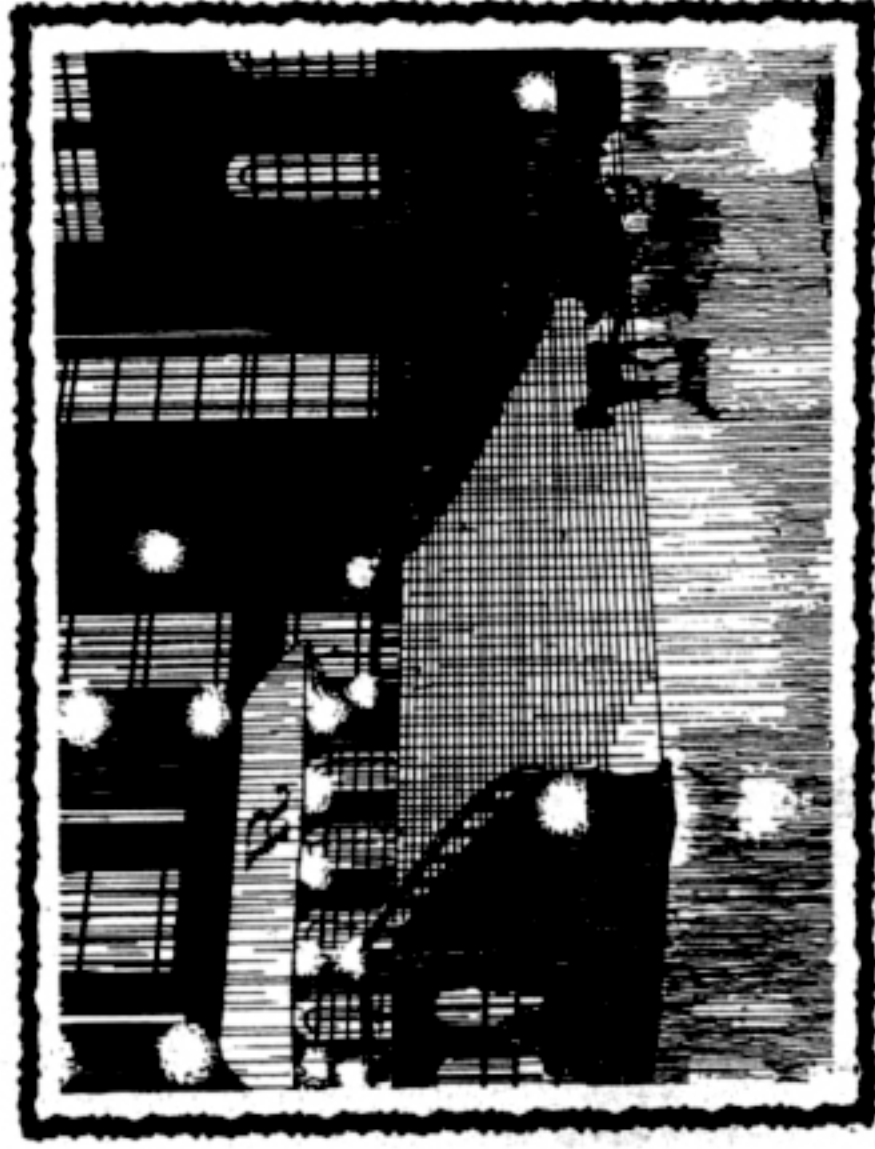
Alas (though such a rapid sequence of serendipitous events would have stretched the credulity of the reader of even the most melodramatic of reads), Dame Fortune smiled upon Victor once more. A near-sighted Administrator of Records for one of the larger distribution concerns chose that moment to mistake the publisher for a small sofa and, as the two of them plunged forward, with identical expressions of complete astonishment, a substantial commingling of assistant editors, production managers, art directors and a retail liaison was obliged, domino-like, to follow suit.

Victor made good his escape. Half-walking, half-running down the hallway, he was joined, very much in the athletic spirit of things, by still and yet another publisher who, trotting along-side, said, 'You don't know me, but I want to offer you the contract-of-a-lifetime for your next read.' Recollecting that this had been his avowed purpose in attending the Trade Show in the first place, Victor slowed down to listen.

'I want to offer you everything,' the fellow was saying, his eyes bright with some manner of entrepreneurial fever. '*Everything*. Every last copper bit that comes in will be yours and yours alone. I won't keep anything.'

'That's wonderful,' Victor said. 'But — what will you live on? How will you pay your printer?'

Victor watched, sympathetically, as the light vanished from the man's eyes, as he sagged within his tailored suit like a punctured balloon. Without a word, the fellow had turned and walked away; out through the Regency's ornate, polished doors; out into the grim, dark night; out into the swirling snow; where he was soon lost from view.

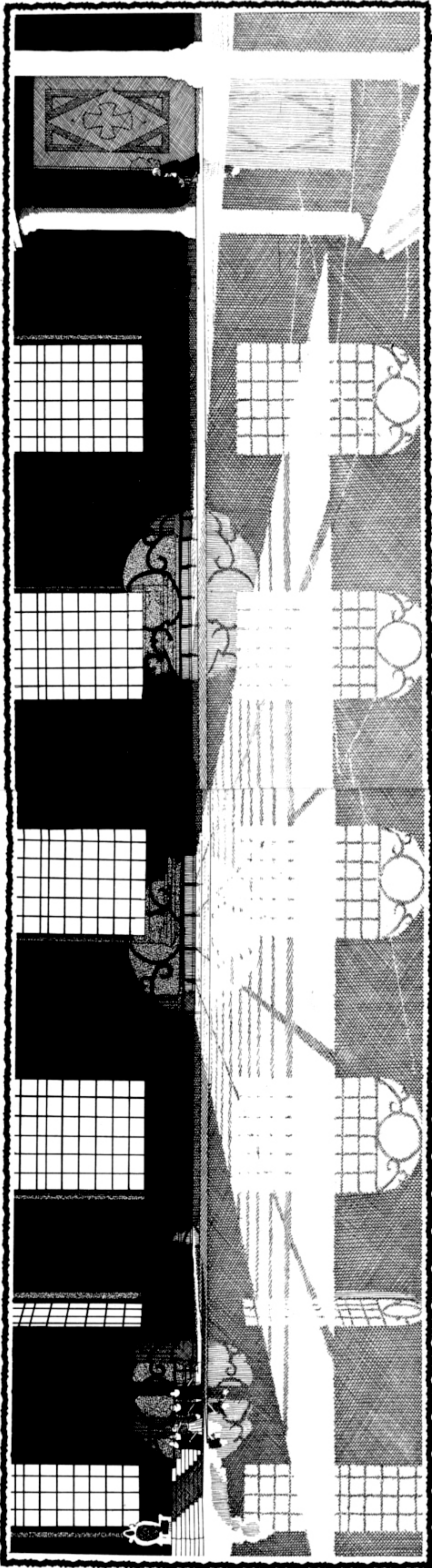
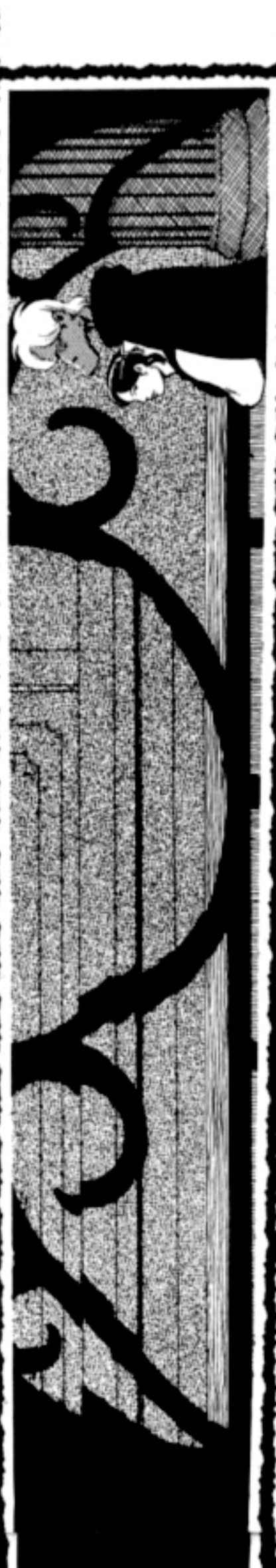
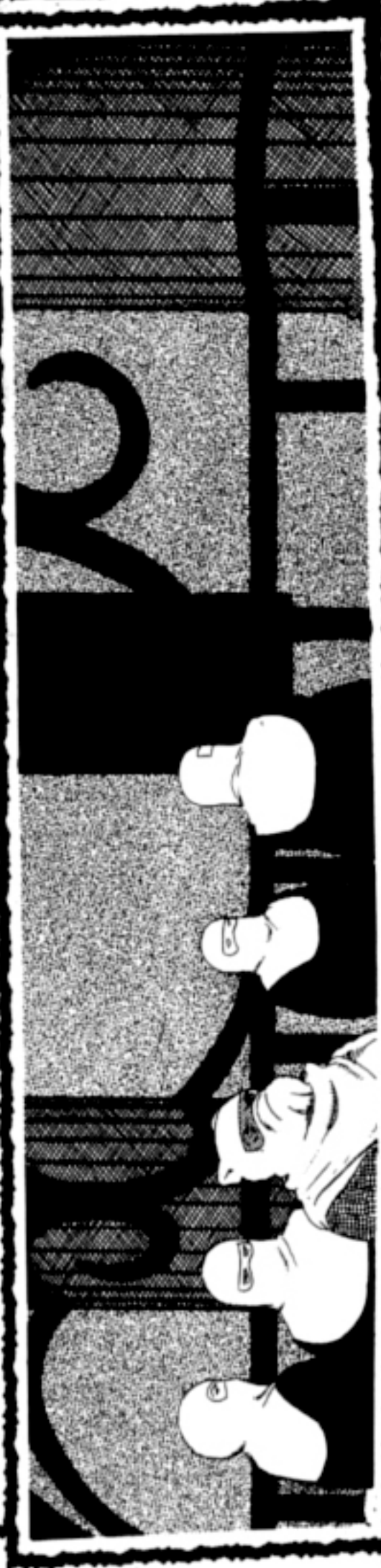




HELLO, CIRIN...



PO.





NO.

I'M NOT HERE
TO TAKE YOUR
THRONE.

I HAD MY FILL
OF THRONES MANY
LIFETIMES AGO...

YOU
READ MY
MIND AND WHAT
YOU SEE IS A
SIMPLE PERSON
...

WHO HAS
SPENT HIS
ADULT LIFE

PLAYING
CHESS WITH
HIMSELF

IN THE
LOWER
CITY...

YOU EXPECTED A MONSTER,
DIDN'T YOU? A BLACK
MAGICIAN WHO SPITS
FIRE, CONJURES DRAGONS,
AND SEEKS TO WREST YOUR
POWER FROM YOU...

THAT SUENTEUS PO
IS THE ILLUSION,
CREATED AND
SUSTAINED BY
YOU ALONE
...

I, ON THE OTHER HAND
EXPECTED TO FIND A
DESPOTIC QUEEN, INSULATED,
ISOLATED... NEUTRALIZED
BY HER PAWNS...


IMPOTENT.

INEFFECTIVE.

CHOKING ON
HER PENT-
UP RAGE
...

AND

HERE
YOU ARE



TRUTH AND
ILLUSION, CIRIN

TRUTH IS WHAT
REMAINS WHEN ALL
ILLUSIONS HAVE
BEEN STRIPPED
AWAY...

THAT IS THE
ANSWER TO
THE QUESTION
WHICH
ECHOES ...

AND
RE-ECHOES
WITHIN
THESE WALLS ...

THAT IS
TRUTH.

THE
'ENDGAME'
HAS BEGUN

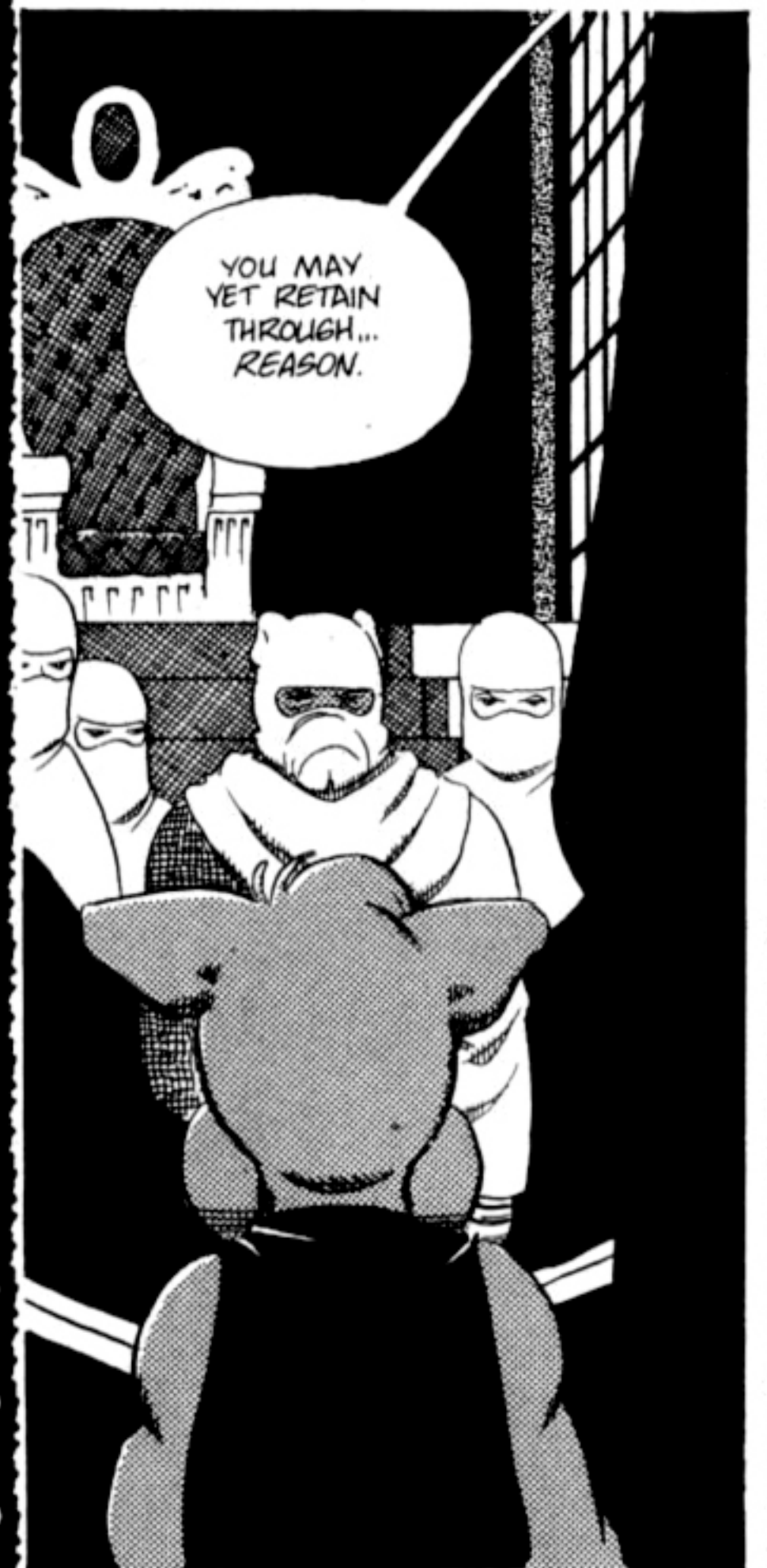
EITHER UNDER YOUR
TELEPATHIC ORDERS
...OR OF THEIR OWN
VOLITION... YOUR GUARDS
ARE ABOUT TO ATTACK
US...

ASTORIA AND
I WILL DIE
QUICKLY...

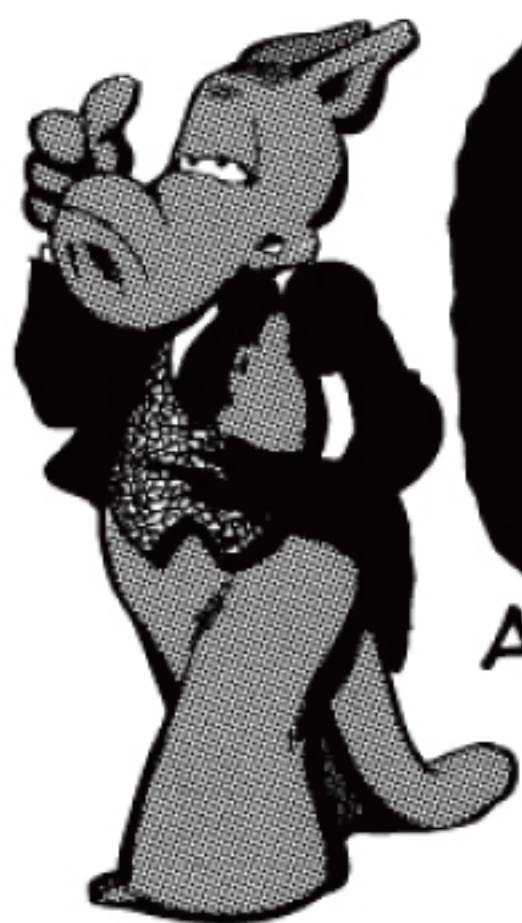
CEREBUS WILL
THEN CUT THE
FIVE OF YOU
DOWN... IN COLD
BLOOD... WITHOUT
BREAKING A
SWEAT...

UNITING THE
EASTERN AND
WESTERN
CHURCHES
...

UNDER HIS
ABSOLUTE AND
UNDISPUTED
RULE...



GO TO...



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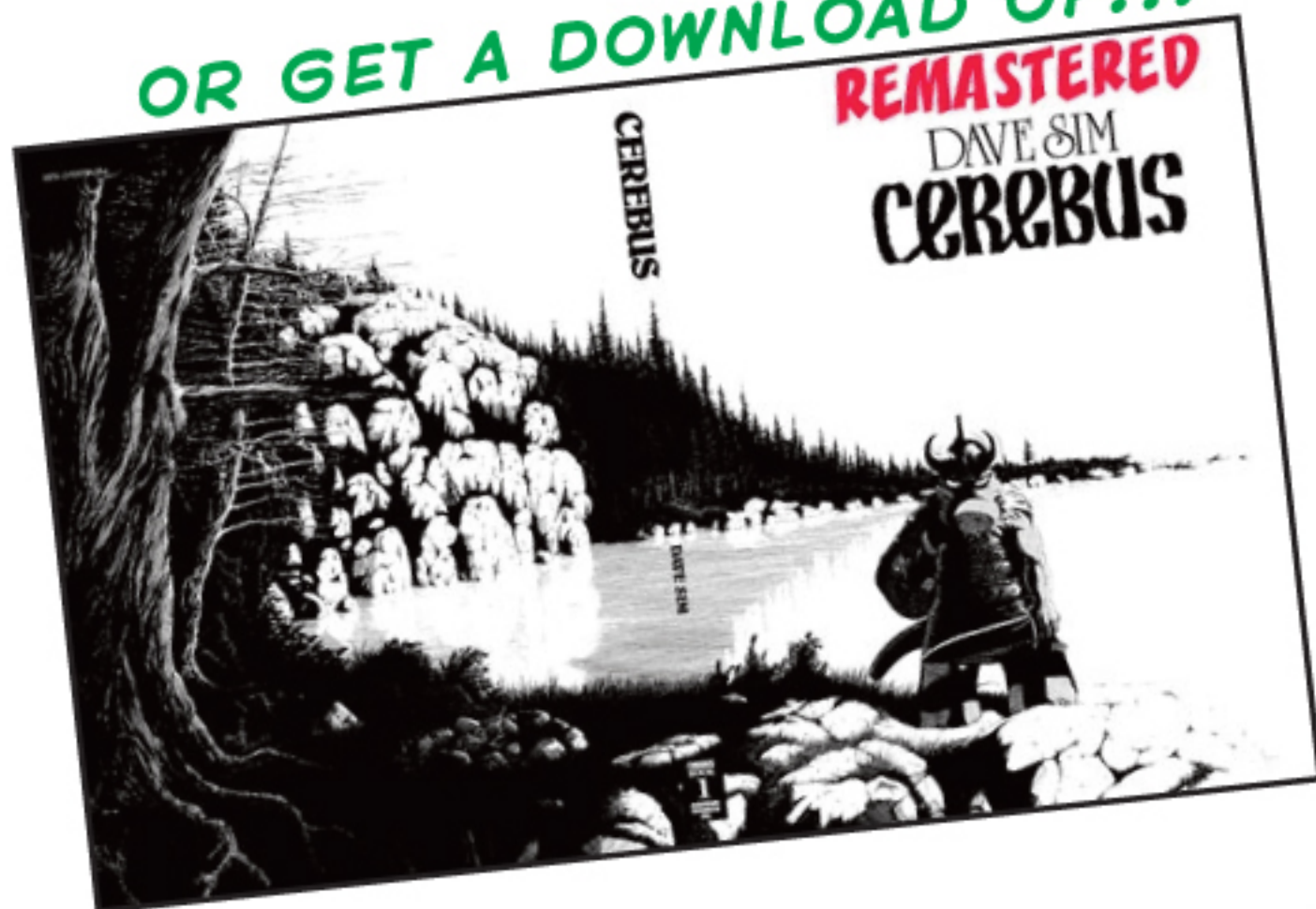
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Deni reads the Publisher's message.

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OR GET THE DOWNLOAD OF...



OR DOWNLOAD SOME, OR ALL OF THE 16 VOLUMES...

